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## Joan Brotherhood



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TO  
MISS ADA FERRAR  
IN TOKEN OF  
A GRACIOUS MEMORY  
THIS STORY OF  
JOAN BROTHERHOOD  
IS DEDICATED  
BY ITS AUTHOR



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on the town bridge a moment to take in the prospect. Under, and to a distance away from him seawards, the Channel was sunk deep between walls ; but winter and the uncertain light so flattened it to his eyes that it looked as featureless as a smudge of ink on white blotting-paper. Yet, gazing intently, he could presently distinguish details : broken railings topping the embankments, chains bearded with foul weeds hanging to the ribs of the water-way. And, seeing the trend of the embankments themselves fashion a prow at a point where the river curved, the fancy took him that here was a vast and ancient wreck sunk in a drift waste of sand—a desolate memory in a desolate place, with only the spume whipping it, and the St. Elmo's candles lighting it overhead.

Lights, indeed, were beginning to wink in the high houses of the town above him. He shook himself and trudged on, climbing the street that sloped upwards from the bridge. His soul was full of the irony of empty fulfilments. At the moment of possessing himself, in the worldly sense, Death had served him with a writ ; and his summons was none so extended a one as to spare him a haunting sense of inevitability. Yet he could have had the heart, if only he had had the stomach, to eat, drink, and be merry ; but that was impossible. So he took the residue of existence for what it was worth in philosophy, and, feeling

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perhaps that he must get into training for the shears, walked over to Frimlington on his first spare evening to have his hair cut.

That might cost him sixpence, a consideration he had known to affect him in odd times of his past. Now his rent-roll was eight or ten thousand a year; and yet the matters of to-day had no concern for him. Only for his weary mind he eternally sought the stimulant of the unexpected—a near futile quest for one of his experience.

He battled his way forward, hardly knowing when he had entered the high town. The storm lashed at his ears, whipping the night into a blinding froth. It might have been a mountain pass he traversed—a gully fantastic with rocks that shaped out of the gloom like houses. A thrill of some ancient abandonment pricked him on. "More, and worse!" he seemed to be crying to himself. He could almost feel the nip of life on his heart again.

Suddenly he came to a blank wall, and turned off sharp to his left. The storm lulled on the instant, as if a door had been shut upon it, and his momentary rapture fell with the wind. Here the flakes dropped hurriedly—into a longish cul-de-sac where were two rows of little shops facing one another all the way down, and a squat-towered church blocked into the

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end. He saw a pink and white pole sticking out from one of these shops, and, recalling his errand, went on to the place.

The fact that here was a very typical abode of primitive barber-ism, so to speak, rather attracted than repelled him. He read, on little printed placards hung about the opaque window-panes, the firm confidences of a capability infinitely more varied than that of the ordinary genteel hairdresser. J. Stillbody, it appeared, not only cut, shaved, singed, and shampooed ; he also with a splendid catholicity extracted teeth or caned chairs,—and these within the limits of a room not so very much larger than a ship's caboose.

A light burned in the shop. Sir John opened the door, descended a single step from the street, and looked straight into the face of J. Stillbody himself.

His first thought was one of an amazing incongruity between the massive inertia of the man and the sprightliness of his advertisements ; his next, that the heat of the little cabin had operated upon its owner until he threatened to fill it—like a great pear ripening in a bottle. No doubt, years of slow adaptation to his surroundings had taught Mr. Stillbody the manner of moving in one piece, as it were ; of educating his every limb and feature to a deliberation

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of conduct that entailed no risk upon his properties. Waxing to the knowledge that an arm put akimbo might mean the splintering of the tiny mirror on the wall; or that an uncontrolled sneeze had possibly brought a dozen of little salve-pots tumbling from the mantelpiece, it is to be believed that he had become the very type and expression of a human dumb-waiter. His large face was impassive and clean-shaved (still, it would seem, a self-accommodating evolution from a former condition of disastrous side whiskers); his eyes swung on slow hinges. He would have been expressionless save for a projecting lower lip and the thickest of black eyebrows.

Now it was never Sir John's humour to expect credit for his appearance; and, therefore, when Mr. Stillbody—in a single gesture, significant though scarcely perceptible—directed him, like any indifferent citizen, to be seated, he squatted down at once on a Windsor chair, with a ready attention for a curious scene that was in process of enacting in the tiny room.

Opposite him, upon another chair, sat a little man muffled into an enormous greatcoat, and with a woollen comforter folded so thickly about his neck that his face looked like nothing so much as a very small egg in a very large cup. He held his two little



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bony claws on his knees, and was bending forward anxiously to watch yet a third figure, that sat in the middle of the room under the actual hands of the operator.

This figure was of a grizzled man of fifty, with a blunt nose, shaven lips and chin, and the tired eyes and lifted wrinkles of a student. That he may have been in a measure; yet his curriculum, it would appear, had taken no account of the Stoics. For indeed he seemed, by the look of his face, to be drained of all blood and philosophy together.

The barber poised a pair of forceps in his right hand.

"Come, now," said he: "a little push, and a little pull."

The patient clutched the lifted wrist convulsively.

"You mustn't!" he gasped: "I can't bear it."

"Stephen!" cried the small man in the comforter reproachfully, wriggling on his seat. "Think of the relief, Stephen!"

"Ah!" whined the victim. "I think of everything, Michael. It's that makes it out of the common bad. You must let it be, Joshua. I couldn't stand it and not go mad. I'm going mad at the thought. Let me get up."

But the barber put a hand like a buffer against his chest.

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"You axed me to do it," he said. "You're a man of your word."

"I'm not: I didn't. I only wanted you to look. Let me up, do you hear!"

"That tooth's coming out," said Mr. Stillbody passionlessly; and, with the word, gripped the patient's shoulder in a ponderous fist.

The menace of determination was like a light to gunpowder. With a frenzied yell the man dashed away the clutch, leapt to his feet and into a corner, where he stood chattering and mowing. Oblivious of a rain of brushes and bottles that he brought down upon his shoulders from a shelf, there he crouched, beating away an imaginary attack, and quite off his head for the moment.

"Let me be!" he shrieked. "Don't dare to come near me. To torture an Englishman against his will! It's awful! Open the door and let me pass without interference, or I'll make a law case of it!"

The little fellow in the greatcoat was on his feet, pitifully expostulating.

"Sakes alive, Stephen," he half wept, "ain't it for your own good? Think of the nights you've suffered, and the rich meats wasted, and the enjoyment of it all to come back to you. It won't take a minute, Stephen."

"My God!" cried the other from his corner, "they all want to kill me—even my own brother. For God's

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sake, sir ! You look a gentleman : you won't let them come at me. I should never survive it. This last week's brought every nerve in my body to the outside. But I'm quite well now. I am indeed. I don't suffer at all."

Mr. Stillbody threw his forceps violently down on the floor, and wheeled slowly to face the new-comer.

"Would you believe it !" he said. "The man's been nigh distracted with the pain, and he come to me of his own accord. To appeal agen an old crony to a stranger ! I'm damned if I'll touch him with so much as the tongs !"

Repudiating even this process as if it were one to characterise the merest tyro in his profession, he assumed a perfectly sooty expression, and folded his arms.

"Joshua," whimpered the patient, "don't talk so. You're my good friend, I know."

"Friend !" cried the dentist, raising his voice to a cautious thunder. "*I'm* not a gentleman ; *I* ain't got a pepper-and-salt ulster with a hood. Don't appeal to me, sir. How can *I* be your friend when I only want to put you out of your misery !"

As he spoke, Sir John observed—what the pre-occupied trio failed to notice—that the door of the shop had been opened by a girl, who stood mutely discussing, from the advantage of her higher position,

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the absurd little exhibition. In the same instant of foreseeing and rather deprecating an interruption, he found himself, a little to his astonishment, caught in the mere witchery of the picture she presented.

It was an oval, very colourless face he saw, with the abnormal red lips and the elfishly indented nostrils of the type that may be either animal rebelling against its enforced redemption, or wilful angel descended from refined altitudes upon a less exacting earth. Earth and sky, indeed, were mingled in the eyes, that were neither brown nor blue, yet shot with both; and the hair was something gold, like sunlight on wheat. About this face she clutched a sombre wimple, as she bent forward in wonder or anger, her mouth a little open, her eyes disking like a cat's; and the snow fell silently behind her, and a light in a shop opposite stood above her head; so that during the moment he saw her thus, and thus framed, Sir John seemed to be gazing on an actual full-length of Hesper—the star that hangs low as a fen-candle over the world to lead men's steps astray.

And, if this was a fantastic image, was it not justified by the elfin loveliness of the apparition?

"My misery!" protested the sufferer. "I'd rather have it, Joshua, than be put out of it for good and all."

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"Nevertheless," said he, "the little man's the hero for my money."

Mr. Stillbody poked him in the neck with the blunt end of the forceps.

"Ah!" said he; "but you don't know anything about it, you see."

"Oh! don't I?"

"There's them as'll tackle a wild elephant in his native junket, and go into hysterics over a black beetle," said the barber. "Stephen Brotherhood's one of 'em. Hair?"

Sir John assenting to the closing demand, he took a comb and a pair of scissors from a little pocket in his apron, and, after some preliminary bites in the air with the latter weapon, swooped upon his quarry. For some moments only the squeak of the steel broke the silence.

"Have *you* ever stood up to Death and defied him?" said Mr. Stillbody suddenly.

"Not that way. You'll give me a chill if you blow down my neck. Yes, I think so."

"*You* think so," said the barber, flaming into retaliatory scorn, "Where's your proofs, then? Show me your proofs."

He bent back the customer's head, as if he expected to find them, like a conjurer's pellet, concealed in his ear.

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"I don't carry them about with me," said the customer. "Does Mr. Brotherhood?"

"Everywhere," answered the barber. "That gal, Joan—she's *his* proofs, for all the world to see."

"She's worth seeing—and knowing, I should think."

"Would you! You aren't far wrong. Her looks and her intellec's a joint stock company that pays a handsome dividend between them," said Mr. Stillbody.

"Well; what's she got to do with her father and the elephant?"

"What elephant?"

"Didn't you mention one?"

"You're dull, sir, ain't you? Stephen's elephant was the raging, roaring sea."

"Was he ever a sailor, then?"

"He was then, as he always has been, in the old-goods line: books, chany, furniture—anything from chips of crockery to coffin stools, so long as it's cracked enough and dirty enough to be useless. The quality buys of him mostly; and that's because the edicated taste favours what we call the rotten."

"Preserve us, now! where are you off to? You say he was this and the other *then*. When, man, when?"

"Gently, you! Say nineteen year ago—the winter

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of the raging seas—when the unknown brig, that none ever identified, struck and bruk on the Shingles, and Stephen, the nerveless man, volunteered for the boat that was lost and found and given up a dozen times before it put into the Key Haven, with only one infant waif to show for salvage."

"One infant waif?"

"Joan that was, sir. Out of the sea she come—tossed like a biscuit on the water. And Stephen he took and kep her even as his own. This did the nerveless man. Shampoo?"

"No. That will do. Well, you interest me."

Mr. Stillbody, holding the chairback as if posing for his portrait, waved his right hand in easy deprecation of a compliment he was used to.

"Threepence," said he.

"And I hope Mr. Brotherhood is justified of his godly venture," said Sir John.

The barber pinched his lips meditatively between his fingers.

"Godly?" said he: "well, yes. The gal's as lissom and pretty as a ginger Persian—wayward, perhaps, and a thought moody. She tuk Stephen in hand from early days, and mothered him and taught him, instead of he her. She's got a gift for spouting as natural as Deborah. Mayhap it was born to her. Who knows! Only—godly? Well, I'm in doubt.



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But, to be sure, there's no sich things as changelings, is there? Not that Stephen ever had child of his own to lose."

"And where is the old-goods shop?"

"Here, in the 'Land of Green Ginger'—up agen St. Mark's Church, where Joan's verger."





## CHAPTER II

THE most fantastic sweet verger, indeed, that ever was engaged to antiquity was Joan Brotherhood. Sober archæologists, making pilgrimage to the ancient church in the Land of Green Ginger (as the court in which Joan lived was called), and finding a very elf-maid committed to their service, would assume, lest this wonder-eyed sibyl should account them Old Mortalities, a guilty jocosity towards cuspings and ogee-arched panels and cavetto cornices; and, lunching at the inn by-and-by, would covet red wines, and hint at the swashbuckler character of mediæval exploration, and flame up to the part, and grow suddenly frightened and silent, because their little lean stomachs were feeling uneasy. Impassioned poeticules would liken their conductor to an angel carried down on a sunbeam from one of the sacrarium windows. Perfervid Anglican ladies would refer to her, in their after letters to one another, as that little bride of St. Mark. Joan, secretly pluming herself on the possession of a gift, to which that of beauty stood only in the relation



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of chaperon, accepted all the tribute as it were deposit-money, and remained very self-possessed and business-like in her occasional transactions with sight-seers. She had no present thought of herself as a fallen angel; the sacredness, in a measure, of her office kept her straight and confident. Neither little was she, nor a bride; yet, for a matter of fifteen years now, pledged for service to the old evangelist whose tower dominated the court.

From his cowl to his crypts, I] think, St. Mark loved her—more, after all, than she did him. She was something of Vivien to this antique Merlin. He would read in no other breviary than her eyes; to no other ears but hers make ghostly confession of his inmost lore. He would warm his old buttressed knees in the sun, and listen with a complacent senility while she expounded him to strangers. She knew his every stone; and words came easily to her. That was her gift—of declamation. She practised on him; but that he did not know, for Joan had so much of the artistic in her that she could always make a grace of necessity. In real fact, her ambitions were not cloisteral; and it must be said that her chief private interest in her engagement was the sixpences and shillings it brought her.

These, for the most part, she laid out in books; not folios foxed and worm-eaten—old trunks of know-

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ledge, with dead leaves, in which her adopted father tunnelled—but new editions crisp from the press, great thoughts in sparkling raiment, as they should be when for presentation to a queen of sovereign beauty. She had quite a little library of dramatic literature, rich and poor, the good earnest of a fruitful saving. For it must not be supposed that Joan and Stephen were ever anything but light of purse. Visitors, after all, to the church were not many; nor were customers to the shop. They were bread and dripping people, these two, with a little joint o' Sundays. Plain living and high thinking were the order, in No. 7 Green Ginger Court; for at least the old book-dealer (he had come at the last to be little but that) had some refined gold of self-education to bestow upon his foundling. Perhaps, at the same time, he used his trade too much for means to an end that was not material profit. He was utterly unpractical, and prone to allow the appreciative to cheapen bargains till these were all in his disfavour. So weak men offend Providence, who, in a world of exchanges, is the High Priest of brokers.

Now, fondly as Stephen loved his waif, and ardently as he desired her welfare, his inherent diffidence must always prevent him from claiming to have a voice in her destinies. Those were preordained apart from him, and excluding his services to her. The account



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of his stewardship was all set down in figures of devotion ; and for the rest he was entitled only to minister humbly to the immediate needs of this his qualified possession. What he could teach her, he taught, because she desired it. But he never doubted that some day she would vindicate herself and her origin through the qualities he rejoiced to see her develop of her own individuality. And when that should happen, he would be quite prepared to obliterate himself from the record, noticeable through no more than that much of the reflected light which her exaltation should vouchsafe him.

So Joan fed her secret aspirations with the sixpences, and grew like an April daffodil. Perhaps she never considered these moneys as the perquisites of her beauty ; and the old bedridden vicar allowed the misconception to go by default. He had been attracted by the bright wilful child. No less were generations of enamoured curates, who, pondering the social disabilities implied in a union with the verger, would fly at last in the face of defamatory spinsterhood, only to find that they had dropped the substance of slippers and mittens for the shadow of a comforter. Joan would have none of them. She flapped her beautiful young wings, and rose in thought high over these groundlings. And year by year she added to her little library—a volume of

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comedy, of tragedy, of prose or poetry—anything living and dramatic. Because?—Why, because she felt, felt, felt in herself the seed of a Siddons or a Bracegirdle.

One evening she came down to tea in the cabin behind the shop. She had been all the afternoon in her bit of a bedroom overhead, reading, declaiming, posturing to the foot of looking-glass on the wall. It was bitter weather; but she had that supreme grace of *waxing* cold, literally. Her face was as white as a candle without flame—none, even, in her little jib of a nose. She knelt down before the fire, warming all her sweet front, and, as she knelt, bent back her head to look into the shop. The glazed door between that and the parlour was open. A single dull lamp hung so as to inform the dull stacks of books on the shelves and the dull straight line of folios in the curved, many-paned window with a common dull twilight. She could see the snow striking on the sleek glass, and sliding down in gouts of reluctant thaw. The place looked like the abortive carcass of a room, the bricks set endwise without cement by some aimless artificer. And he, it would appear, was even there, as always, to point the moral—poring over black-letter at the counter in inglorious content.

She called to him, with a shiver of peevishness, to

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come and have his tea. He started to the first sound of her voice, and answered immediately.

"Joan," said he, hurrying in, "I've been waiting for you with news—strange news, Joan."

"I'm frozen and hungry," said the girl. "I thought you would never stop talking below there."

"Why, did it disturb you, my bird? But you'll forgive daddy Steenie when you know."

"I don't want to, till I've had bread—I live in such an empty world, daddy."

He took his cup and plate, eyeing her wistfully.

"It's empty, Joan, I know," he said. "To come down from your dreamings up there—why, it's like a lark dropping into a brick-field."

"A lark, daddy! To rise and fall and fall and rise, always over the same spot. That's to be no better than Rapunzel in her tower. When will my Prince come and call to me to let down my hair? I must go to him, I think. I will be a swallow—a swallow; not a lark, daddy Steenie."

"You will be," said the bookseller, "whatever you decide to be, I am sure."

She looked at him with preoccupied eyes.

"What a strange bloodless little monster," she said; "what an inhuman figure of a parchment daddy! Are you all touchwood inside, little fellow?"

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"Kindling wood, Joan—kindling wood ; and you are the maid to fire me."

"Some day, daddy, I shall hope to indeed. You shall have a box to yourself—a whole box, with silk curtains, in the grandest theatre of all the world—and you shall flush and burn down to the bottom of your little wooden heart to hear the thunder of voices proclaim your foundling—yours, daddy Steenie—the greatest actress of her day."

He hardly doubted it. He rejoiced that she took the issue out of his hands. Kindling wood !—he was blazing already.

"You have it in you," he cried : "you have it all in you, my bird, ready against the opportunity."

"The opportunity !"

She suffered an immediate relapse.

"When will that come ?" she sighed, shaking her head dismally.

Stephen shook his ; then protested anxiously—

"Never through a curate, Joan. For goodness' sake don't you ever be tempted to fall *that* low on a question of opportunity."

He spoke with unexampled stress and gravity. These white-rabbity young men, with their spiritual affinities and caressing ways, were a terror to him. It was his living dread that Joan would some day allow herself to be coaxed up from her social basement by

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some such professional wheedler, and would so at a step stultify his—Stephen's—darling ambitions for her. It should not be, if he could prevent it. His dear, his flower, that was to "take the winds of March with beauty," and the world by sweetest storm of genius, to be plucked unripe by a callow hierophant, nibbled by a rabbit, condemned to premature extinction under a monkish cowl! He was determined about it as he was determined in no other matter that affected her. Perhaps, being entirely woman, she chose to cower smugly under this unwonted breeze of resolution, letting it fan her smouldering good humour into brightness. In the warmth of this her affection expressed itself even to demonstration. She laughed at his dismayed face.

"Never, never, never, little daddy!" she said. "I am a royal lily, sir, as stiff as stiff; not a drooping milkmaid for a country parson's button-hole."

She had him over to the fire by-and-by; and filled his pipe for him, and sat at his feet, resting her cheek on her twined fingers. Her hair, lolling heavily over his knees, was a possession a miser might have envied him. He said so, handling it tremblingly, in a gush of emotion.

"I wish it was really," she said drowsily. "I wish I could cut it off and mint it, and let it grow and cut it off again. What a Fortunatus's purse, daddy!"



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"But some day, Joan, you would find it only silver currency, and that when you could least spare it."

She cried, "How dare you, sir! I am never going to be old," and then she laughed again.

"A copper head is the best investment, for it's worth most at the last. Daddy," she said, "have you ever in all your life had as much as twenty real gold beautiful sovereigns for your own at one time?"

"Lord bless me, Joan, no!"

"Supposing you had; supposing you had now at this moment a hundred pounds given you, what would you do with them?"

"What should I do? The thought takes my breath away. I should—I should lease a whole splendid theatre for my bird here, and grow rich on the one per cent. she allowed me out of the profits."

She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed it; then sighed and fell into a fit of abstraction.

"Now," she said, suddenly stirring and looking up, "I have forgotten all about your wonderful news. What is it, if you please, little man?"

"Ah! to be sure," said Stephen. His voice had a note of embarrassment, and he cleared his throat once or twice.

"Girlie," said he, "do you remember the stranger that came—ahem!—that came into Joshua's place the other night, when—when——"

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"You needn't be very particular, daddy. I remember him, of course, thanks to you."

"Joan, I was in such a state. I couldn't have believed it of myself, but——"

"Now, daddy!"

"All right, my dear. Well, he was in here this afternoon, and, good Lord! who d'you suppose he turns out to be?"

"Not Sir John Swayne?"

"Not—now, Joan, who told you?"

"Nobody, I declare. I made the wildest guess on purpose."

"It was he—Sir John himself—the new master of the Hall. And he said the kindest things, Joan; and I ashamed to look him in the face. God bless me, what a man! no care or pride for his position; content to come in his rough clothes and gossip for an hour with the old book-dealer."

"No credit to him for that," said Joan sharply; "except for knowing a better gentleman than himself."

"My dear, my dear! But he's full of the right modesty of scholarship, Joan, and a man of the world to boot. There's no better mixture than that to be found."

The shop bell tinkled; a stream of raw night flowed in; and, carried on it, as it were, came swimming to the parlour a great buoy and a little buoy—Joshua

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Stillbody and Michael Brotherhood. They dropped anchor before the fire, and set to smoking without a word, as if they were hired by the hour to kill moth. It was the way of the Land of Green Ginger; and that is all that is to be said of it. Joan criticised the two from under sleepy lids; but otherwise took no account of them as she harped on a desultory theme.

"Well," she said, yawning, "I know a sweeter mixture and nearer home; and it doesn't matter a bit; but you haven't asked me yet what I intend to do with *my* hundred pounds."

"Ah! to be sure," said Stephen.

The other two, unhitching their pipes from their lips, exhaled exclamatory O's.

"*Your—underd—pounds!*" murmured Michael.

Joan put up a hand to Stephen's mouth.

"Let me see," she said; "you take the theatre, daddy; that's arranged. So I shall have all mine to spend on jewels, and silk stockings and frocks, such as you never saw, from London."

"*All yours?*" muttered uncle Michael again.

He put his pipe on the mantelpiece, and looked in a dazed manner at Joshua. Mr. Stillbody thereupon leaned over, placed his pipe beside the other and clasped his hands over his paunch. The faces of both cronies were addressed dumbly to Joan.

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"All," said the young lady, "except, of course, what I shall give in presents."

"Ah!" exclaimed Joshua, as if smacking his lips on the heels of a dram.

Michael hugged his chapped hands under his arm-pits.

"Joan," said he, "I never misdoubted you was a generous gal. What's the mystery toward, you little rogue? Presents, indeed. O Lord! thinks I to myself as I come up here, that I could quit my obligations to my dear niece with a turkey and sausages agen this coming Christmas. There was a goose in Jarrod's that it made you greasy to look at. To my mind that's the reel bird for a feast. Just an eight-pounder, with the yellow fat under its thigh and the stuffin' in its belly, Joan. And fried taties and apple sauce, my dear; and a short bite at a hot Christmas-pie; and a bottle of invalid's port to keep the lot from cakin', Joan."

Mr. Stillbody sighed on the back-draught of another invisible dram; then turned up his toes and gazed at them critically, as if they were toast.

"But of course such fare isn't for the likes of us," said Michael anxiously. "Is it, Joan?"

"No, no," said Stephen hurriedly. "We were only petting our fancies with how we'd lay out the money if we had it, Michael, lad."

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The buoys slowly twisted at their moorings, looking into one another's faces.

"Petting his fancy," said Joshua. "*Petting* his fancy," he heaved out, with tremendously obscure emphasis.

Each reached over and seized his pipe. Michael sniffed violently.

"That's how you make a spoilt child of it, Stephen," he said. "That's why you ain't fit to cope with the world. A spoilt child dreads the fire, you know. If you ask me, I should say, For goodness' sake be practical, Stephen, and don't learn your fancy to deceive itself or others."

"I love a practical man," said Joshua, "one as won't pet his fancy with the croolty of a proved chum."

"Come, come," said Stephen. "I'm not the first of fancy-mongers in the family, Michael. How does the play go, brother?"

Michael was touched, but not immediately mollified. He suffered, let it be said, from the taint of diffidence in urgencies combined with self-confidence in un-essentials. He was a compositor by trade (a very bad one), and was considered the practical man of the set. But secretly he had no great faith in his own professional virility. Providence, the taskmaster, predestined him, he believed, to a higher form than the printer's; and Joan was offered the visible

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earnest of its intentions. Through her *he* was to procure recognition. The bent of his genius being dramatic, this waif of histrionic tendencies had timely come from the unknown to interpret him. It is true, realisation of his destiny did not inspire him till pretty late in life (he was over fifty when he began to write his play); but then neither was the instrument ready to his hand during her years of novitiate.

"You mayn't be the first, but you're the worst, Stephen," said he. "The play goes and it goes, sir—as well now as in the prospect, sir. *I deal* in the article of fancy. I'm a man of business, like Shakespeare. Genius lays in knowin' how to turn itself to marketable account. That's the difference between you and me. *You're* all for profitless speculation. You don't know your own mind."

"No better than a chum from a stranger," said Mr. Stillbody.

"Not intimately, to be sure, Michael," said Stephen gaily. "I don't think I could, you know; no more than one can claim to be especially familiar with a gent that has a large circle of acquaintances. I can't insist on a monopoly of its attentions when it has such a many others to demand a share of 'em."

"Well!" bellowed Joshua: "of all the pretended lowliness that ever spelt conceit——"

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A laugh from Joan, of subtle but recognised quality, stopped him in mid-blast. His chagrin had been long accumulating. Now the rest of it wheezed out inarticulate, as it were the remainder wind from a bellows half-emptied.

"Don't you think you've abused daddy enough?" said the girl, in her primmest little voice: "and if it's meant for me, you can say it to my face; because the fancy of the hundred pounds was mine, you know."

"I'm sure I never meant to abuse your father, Joan," said Michael, quite meek in a moment. "All I charge him with is that he wants bottom. How can he sit there and not know it?"

"Nonsense," said Joan.

"It isn't reely, my dear. Now is it, Stephen?"

"Very like, Michael—very like."

"There!—I tell you what, brother; you should go down one of these evenings and listen to Mr. Latimer. He'd put backbone into you."

"Oh ay! Mr. Latimer—the Drill Hall missionary, isn't it? Well, Michael, I'll own it gives me a sort of shame to sit under a snippet of a parson and not rebuke him for correcting his elders."

"Ah! to be sure. Well, well. But this one's not like others."

"How isn't he, uncle Michael?" said Joan.



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"Why, my dear, I don't know. P'r'aps because he gives you the body and blood of religion instead of the vestments. He stakes on Holy Writ without dogma, like a blessed Apostle repeating what he's learnt at first hand. And as to tongues of flame—why, I'll tell you, Joan, he's nothing more nor less than a tower of Babel."

Joan opened her eyes at this astonishing image; then mused a little.

"Well," she said, "I've been told about him and about his influence with the water-side folk. Shall we go and hear him, daddy—you for backbone, and I for a lesson in elocution?"

"As you will, girlie," said Stephen.

"I do will, sir. At least, I think I do. No, I don't. If he's really good he'd make me have a bad opinion of myself, and that would be shocking."

She rose and stretched herself, and moved to the door.

"I'm going to bed," she said: "and never mind, uncle Michael, about the hundred pounds. If I haven't got it now, I shall have it some day. You see."

"Ah!" said the little man, irresistibly recompelled to his grievance in prospect of her retreat. "And when you do, you'll lay it all out in silk stockings and such like. And where will my brother Stephen come in, Joan?"



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She paused in the act of turning the handle, dwelt a moment in silence, then hurried back to the fireside, and put her arms gently, caressingly about the book-seller's neck.

"My pretty bird," he murmured.

"Daddy," she said, "you *shall* take me to hear Mr. Latimer."

She turned upon Michael and stamped her foot.

"He shall have it all, every penny," she said. "And as to the goose, I'll never speak to him again if he gives you so much as the parson's nose, you little greedy man."

She vanished in a whisk of tempest. The company fell into a sort of dismayed coma.

"So much for woman's word," muttered Joshua contemptuously at length. But there was a more inscrutable pathos in Michael's eyes.

"It was too fat to be true," he said, in a breaking voice. "I thought so from the moment I see it laid out at Jarrod's."

### CHAPTER III

THE Drill Hall in Frimlington was a sort of theatre of moral varieties. Thither, seeking their souls' pabulum, came the groundlings of society—a sorry temperate riff-raff, and always oddly critical of the fare provided it. Lecturers, propagandists, revivalists, expositors of divination by Biblio-, Theo-, or any other of the fifty and one mancies; theorists with infallible systems of redemption; unattached clerical tramps and missionary tub-thumpers—such, drifting upon the little old town in their wanderings, and sympathetically touching and dwelling a moment on its longshore flats, supplied the mudlarks, so to speak, their only entertainment.

The Land of Green Ginger (to take a typically poor and decent little quarter) was expert at assaying the value of the metal submitted to it. It flattered itself it could tell gold from brass—a perspicacity less simple than it appears. But, to be sure, if your playgoer witnesses nothing but Moralities, he must sooner or later become an authority on the decalogue.

The *Land* had accepted Mr. Latimer with even

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astonishing affability. He came to it—the representative of a brotherhood of Latter-day Apostles—commissioned to interpret the Word, in his own exceptional way, on the Word's plain merits. That is to say, he explained it as he found it—a word of counsel and comfort; a word of rebuke and warning; a watchman's cry from the middle maze; a bugle sounding the reveille; a word inspired and inspiring, wrung with the poetry of sorrow, yet never inarticulate like that "voice blown over desolate places" that was heard only when the last of the oracles was withdrawn; above all, a word not to be quoted for charter to a sect. He came to it—a strange personality speaking strange imagery with the faculty that illuminates obscurity with glowing phrase—from the unknown outland. Thence, indeed, the Hall was wont to accept, without question or curiosity, the most of its entertainers. It knew nothing of reputations. The measure of its attendance was the measure of its approval; and the measure of its approval was consentaneous with its trained appreciation of Moralities.

The Reverend Gerard Latimer took the Hall by storm. He appeared in it (from anywhere), one of those artless empirics to whom the cure of souls is an inspiration; who owe nothing to orthodoxy but the compliment of disqualification; whose peril lies only

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in the giddiness induced by their own moral exaltations. Tall, lank, and hectic, the weaknesses that were the very source of his power declared themselves on the surface. He wore his heart on his sleeve. It was a flaming token. All acute energies and immediate exhaustions, he was a tower of refuge to harassed borderers on the land of despair, and not so much an object as a stumbling-block to them in his periods of depression.

These in him were temperamental and inevitable. The man of convictions is the man of limited ideas. A vivid imagination must necessarily break its heart in confinement. To such, dogma is the cage of faith. To escape the essential vulgarity of a dogmatic God, a God of such narrowness that He could commission a sect to represent Him, the young man, the ordained young priest, had wandered far from the fold, had shut himself within himself, seeking the hermitage of a quiet mind ; had hurried into the streets, clutching and gasping for light ; had even swerved against paganism, and dwelt a moment on the warm contact. From that peril of seduction he had been rescued fortuitously by James Wilson, one of a small company of proselytising irregulars who called themselves, daringly enough, the Post-Ascensionists, or Latter-day Apostles. This body had no definite rules of conduct ; it took no vows. One interest it had at heart—to win back

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to the teaching of Christ through the centuries of ritual that confounded it; one understanding—to live in celibacy, like its divine model.

Wilson introduced his neophyte to the fraternity and to its methods, that were after all no methods, but the simple experiments of a few reactionists in primitive Christianity. He introduced more than he thought. Gerard, springing exultant from his own reaction, saw revealed, as he believed, in this little community the ideal he had long struggled to realise. From the moment of his joining he dominated it, at first by sheer sweet strength of refinement. For these apostles, though earnest men (men, too, one and all of more or less independent means), were rugged and uneducated. To them Gerard coming, with his persuasive genius for words, seemed like the descending of the tongues of flame. He gave them new thoughts, new speech, a new example. Yet he could not teach them, who lacked the refining traditions of schools, how to appear to claim all the obligation in making others a present of their convictions. They went over the land, adopting his manner, retailing his fire; but they would scorch with it instead of warming and illuminating.

Fanaticism, indeed, may be in a freethinker no less than in a theologian. The liberalism that would make men free against their will is only a subtler

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form of tyranny. That is a point too nice for appreciation by the unlearned reformer, who is prone to think himself the pioneer of truths that are only in fact truisms. The Post-Ascensionists were bent upon *burning away* from the body of faith the accumulated vestments of dogma.

Wilson, it has been said, introduced into the Community more than he thought ; not, indeed, more than he was prepared to welcome with all the sombre enthusiasm of which he was capable. The actual promoter of the brotherhood, he embodied in himself its best and its most forbidding qualities. So absolutely single-hearted in his mission that he could, at once and without a qualm, yield to the neophyte of inspired parts the spiritual leadership of the little band, his principles were the principles of an evangelical Marat. He would flog, pinch, and scorch from Holy Writ ; he would scald the swinish flesh of sin, and scrape it clean with a knife-edge ; he would torture to wring a cry of repentance. To him it was all a cleansing of the Augean stables, that must be drastic to be effective. Yet his strong dark nature was capable of infinite sympathies—of passionate regards. Such he had for the young priest who had carried light into the gloomy labyrinths of his soul. He may have felt hitherto the obscurity of his own teaching. Now he would not deviate from his course, but the

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course itself was made clear. He looked only upon James Wilson as a discipline in the hands of this young saint who cleared the temple. Recognising from his own native strength the other's weakness, he watched over him, an unwearying ministrant to his fortitude. He was the shepherd's dog. He loved Gerard as Bellicent loved Gareth.

Whither the neophyte went, there came his vigilant colleague. It was the custom of the Post-Ascensionists to hunt in couples, and it befell naturally that these two joined issue. On whatever platform, in whatever town, the nervous-spoken priest, with his thin radiant face and bright hair, and the little, grim, thickset, heavy-browed man his adjutant were inseparable. So the Drill Hall came to associate them during their three weeks' desultory mission in Frimlington; so came to accept the coadjutor (who would seem to hug himself, and gnash his teeth at it, noting each telling blow by his principal); so came to tolerate his custom of capping eloquence with stereotyped denunciation. The Hall took to Gerard. It had known preachers who must eke out their poverty of language with dissolving views. Here was no need of slide or lantern. It had but to sit quiet, with its mental vision receptive, and the pictures were made to pass before it by the simple working of phrase.

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One evening the preacher broke ground upon what he called the sins of default—the tacit acquiescence in negative conditions of virtue. The skipper who, trusting to his proverbial luck, went to sea with unworkable davits, and found himself in shipwreck cut from all means to escape; the engine-driver who “chanced” the signals in a fog because he had never known them to be against him in the clear, and rushed upon destruction; the tradesman who, finding his balance wrong by a shilling, debited the insignificant amount to “sundries,” and realised too late that the error had pointed to ruinous defalcations—with such illustrations he informed his text.

Somewhere there is a description of a man who calls himself the Orange King. This man will take a fruit and a knife, and by mere dexterity of manipulation will fashion the rind—working from the pulp as a basis, and progressing from primitive into complicated forms—into a perfectly designed arabesque. It is like evolving a sonata from a phrase. So did Gerard. He would take some such curt thesis as one of the above, and strip by strip build up its environments into a witchery of form, through whose tracery nevertheless the heart of the subject was always visible. He would make his characters, whether drawn from fact or fancy, live and breathe, and breathe lower and die.

Now, he would say, would not these men, the



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merchant and the sailor and the engineer, probably resent being told they were liars ; yet what subtler form of lie is there than to accept confidence knowing all the time we are taking no measures to vindicate our responsibility to it? It is to repudiate one's liability towards a debt of honour that can show no bond. And the wrong to oneself is but a fraction of the wrong, after all. The tradesman may be a man constitutionally indolent or morally doting ; and because of that, his affected blindness or kindness, some petty-pilfering cashier may come to graduate in a course of crime from which a timely warning would have saved him. More (for this cankered apple may lie amongst sound ones), such fondness may corrupt a shopful, a community, a city.

Thus also the responsibility of a skipper or an engine-driver who presumes upon the odds of chance is to the generations, the whole march of which may be influenced by the sacrifice of lives many or few. Bill Stoker runs by a signal in the fog, and behold ! a hundred years hence Mary Magdalen jumps into the river from Waterloo Bridge because the death of a remote ancestor in a railway accident committed the fortunes of her family to decline. Again—to plumb deeper—X is slandered. “I won't condescend to refute the calumny,” says he—with what result ? He is condemned by default ; he writhes impotent under

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the injustice; still he is looked at askance. In a vitiated atmosphere his soul grows wryed—grows red, “like the dyer’s hand.” He bequeaths a cramped moral heritage to his children.

This, no doubt, was psychology subtle in its bearings. It was the dramatic directness of the man—his gift of throwing himself into a part—that read the tale to simple hearts a simple ethical lesson. It was limelight without gas; a panorama in words.

“Once,” said he, “there was a famous actor.—It is a high mission, that of personating Truth herself; and there is none lends itself more to glory or abuse.—This actor was worthy of his art and his art of him. He never forgot whom he represented; never played the mountebank to popularity. One evening a supper was given on the stage of the theatre at which he performed. It was to commemorate a new triumph—a triumph to which a beautiful young actress who sat at the great man’s right hand had contributed not a little. Where the table was laid all was light and sparkle. The jangle of voices made a merry symphony; the glasses clinked like bells. Beyond stretched the foggy dusk of the auditorium, tier over tier peopled with shrouded seats that looked like long rows of tombstones.

“‘And that they are,’ said an envious super to his

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neighbour. 'They speak of the departed. They record the vanity of fame.'

"'We revel like Belshazzar on the verge of silence,' said the other gloomily, looking down into the empty orchestra.

"These were certainly the skeletons at the feast. The beautiful young actress heard them, and shrunk back a little. The great actor heard too; and he laughed, and his chiming voice took up the fable.

"'On the verge of sleep, rather,' said he. 'Tomorrow down there the music will reawaken. In this brave march of life, let it be for the laggards and the cravens to foretell silence. To the courageous a tombstone is but a milestone by the way. It speaks of a voice departed—whither? Into the realms of silence, says our friend here. Then the silence is silence no longer. But, in truth, is there silence beyond? Do not our uttered words fly before us, perhaps to represent us in the land to come? As we instruct them, so shall *we* appear. Think of it, think of it, before the lie, or the slander, or the blasphemy passes your lips. Some day you shall follow whither your words have preceded you—shall follow, on the heels of your last word, your final emissary—and there must abide by the character you have given yourself through these your accredited representatives.

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Think of it ; and, thinking, act and pronounce as if God's reporter were always at your elbow.'

"The whole company was by this time engaged to the speaker. He rose in his place.

"‘Silence,’ said he, ‘is foretold only of those who dread to hear the evidence of their own voices—of those still, small voices in particular that speak not so much of the sins of passion as of the sins of default. These shall ring loudest in the hereafter ; these shall give the damning testimony. Which of us is not self-condemned in the prospect ? Is it you, or you ? It is not I, at least, as I will convince you.

"‘Once long ago, during a provincial engagement, I had spent the whole of a winter afternoon in my dressing-room at the theatre. Towards evening, tired and hungry I quitted the building ; and, as I stepped into the street, I remembered that I had left a long lawn cravat hanging in dangerous proximity to a naked gas jet. I hesitated—moved a reluctant pace or two—stopped. Had I opened the window ? That I could not recollect. I faced about to return. The cold windlessness of the evening occurred to me. The world hardly breathed. I was thoroughly exhausted and in need of refreshment. I turned again, with an impatient jeer at my own over-sensitiveness. There were—or should be—in the theatre people who must sooner or later notice the light

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burning and turn it off. Moreover—the dead calm ; and, finally, the unlikelihood of my having in my preoccupation opened the window.

“I walked the length of the street. As I turned a corner a little puff of air brought a flush of apprehension to my cheek. I hesitated once more ; but I had now so stretched conscience as to take all spring from it. The flare and clatter and everyday life of the scene about me seemed to make a grotesque absurdity of my fancy. I turned into a restaurant and forgot all my qualms in the enjoyment of the moment.

“An hour passed ; and suddenly I awoke to consciousness that some unwonted excitement was astir. Figures kept rising from their places and hurrying forth ; the swing-door of the room whirled without ceasing. All in an instant I caught the echo of ‘fire.’

“Fire !—The draught of its roaring drew upon my brain. I felt my mind snatched up like a leaf and whirled into the furnace. I never had a doubt but that it was the theatre. The blaze of it beat upon me over the housetops as I stood in the street—stood, feeling a risen wind fan that other flame of despair that withered my soul.

“Of all the staring crowd the light seemed to seek me out. I fled before it, a marked man, and it pursued me. The darkest courts, the dankest gulleys



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were my refuge. Scurrying by way of them, I came down upon the river.

“‘There, with the solemn moving of the water, went by a ghastly procession : a ruined manager ; a ruined company ; a score of desolate homes. I heard the screams of agony from wretches trapped in those glowing ovens under the street. I traced the consequences of my crime down remote ages.

“‘My scorched soul panted only for water ; and the frenzy still pursued me. I turned like a hunted thing upon it before I made the plunge. I turned—and——’”

Silence took the Drill Hall like an afterclap. The young priest—the actor himself for the time being—stood as if dumbfounded before a spirit he could have thought he had evoked. From all the shoal of rapt faces addressed to him, one—a girl’s—seemed to stand forth to comprehend and claim him. It was very white and eager, this face, with an unearthly fixity about the eyes, such as one might imagine in a mermaid’s accustomed to the wash of water. Its steadfast gaze so held him that thenceforth he must justify his art to it alone. For the first time he was conscious of an egotistic side to his mission.

He had checked himself, intentionally, with dramatic effect. Now he must snatch desperately at the situation before it slipped him. Yet he could not

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take his eyes from the face ; and presently he thrilled to recover his cue from some quality of sympathy that he read therein. And so again he was acting the actor.

“—the distant flare over the houses caught my eyes and my breath. I gasped, staggered, and recovered myself. It was something in the direction of the light that had struck me. My pulses beat as if they would crack. I felt, like a half-drowned soul, in physical sickness and agony as life refilled my veins. In a moment I had turned my back on the river, and was running—running. Long before I reached the theatre I knew that only my stricken imagination had fired it. It stood lofty and intact. I entered—descended to my dressing-room, intending to lock myself in before yielding to the emotion that would not be controlled. In the passage below, I came across the fireman, an honest gruff soul.

“‘Ah !’ said I, desperately commanding my voice ; ‘I remembered that gas, and felt a little uncomfortable about it. I’m glad to see you turned it off.’

“‘No thanks to me,’ said the man—‘or to you, sir, that the place wasn’t burnt about our ears.’

“‘I asked him why, feeling my heart stand still.

“‘Why ?’ said he : ‘what did you leave, sir, hanging within a foot of the flame, and the window open ? It it hadn’t happened that one of our young ladies

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passed by and saw it, and took what should have been your duty upon herself, there would have been some of us ruined, if not dead, by now.'

"The great actor, returning from his past to his present self, looked down, and indicated by a caressing gesture of his hand the girl who sat beside him.

"'To let go by default, because the evidence is unhandy or conflicting—that is neither humanity nor good art,' said he. 'It was so I condemned myself; it was so I gained a lesson of my sweet mentor here, who is indeed no other than she who in that old provincial theatre years ago saved me the consequences of my sin. You have applauded her to-night for her performance. I, who have made it my grateful pleasure to father her career, know that that performance was simply the ultimate and inevitable expression of a nature that has never equivocated to itself. It has achieved because achievement lies in the infinite respect of details. In the outer silence some day she shall find her perfect voice.'"

The preacher made his period with glowing face and lifted arm. The momentary silence that ensued was broken by a desultory patter of applause. It was a consequence of his method that the gods after their fashion approved him; and, though his scholarship might rebel, the emotional side of him was grateful. He was wont to play, indeed—knowing his *métier*—to



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the gallery ; but he was so confident of his command of that as never to hesitate to pelt it with flowers of rhetoric. Such were the salve to his own intellectual conscience ; and for the rest his dramatic audacity carried the moral triumphant. So the Drill Hall, although it might not altogether follow the process, applauded the result.

This he had looked for ; though he was vaguely self-conscious that the best of his appeal—that part of it with which he had indulged himself rather than his audience—had been made in a particular direction only ; had been in the nature of an experiment to test the quality of one rarer understanding that seemed to stand forth of the crowd of homely sympathies. He saw the steadfast white face still. It wrought an odd confusion in his brain. Its eyes haunted him. All of a sudden he broke out inspired into a fresh tale of love and wrong and pathos indescribable.

. . . . .

“Latimer, what are you doing here ?”

The snow fell upon a scene of sordid desolation—black night holding a shattered wharf. Below, the river, hardly visible, sucked and swilled in its beastly trough. Half-blinded lights blinked the flakes from their eyes here and there. It seemed to rain mud in gouts of muddy froth from a heaven trod to miriness, so beslavered was everything below with slime.

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"Why have you followed me, Wilson? I wished to be by myself."

"Bad company in such a place. You're all of a tremble, man. Give me your arm, I say."

"Let me be."

"I won't. Give me your arm. What brought you here?"

"The devil, like enough."

"So I thought. You're in one of your moods, you know. You've gone it too strong to-night, and this here's the result. Was that story of the actor true?"

"Was it fact, you mean. How can I tell? Facts lie, Wilson. Here am I living and in hell. Imagination's the truer truth. It has sent me running from the fire to the river. Hark how the water clutters and chuckles down there. And was mine too the sin of default, Wilson? I lit the flame and left it burning."

"Steady, now! God's *your* fireman, sir, to attend to it."

"But I don't want it turned down, you fool. I want it to burn and burn and burn and set alight. That's why I'm not fit to live. That's why I came here. My God, Wilson—many waters cannot quench it."

"Come away from the river—do you hear? You've gone one too many on that fancy of yours."

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"In the crowd of figures Nemesis may arise unobserved. That's true, Wilson. I'm haunted and hunted. Wilson, Wilson, what shall I do!"

"Listen here, Latimer. It isn't for me to discredit the gifts of the Lord. I say, don't abuse 'em, that's all."

"Have I abused them?"

"I don't know. My bowels yearn to my brother, and I ain't a fit judge. Ask yourself, sir. You're a gentleman and a scholar. Ask yourself. Does the Lord sanction this power of invention to drive home His word? Will He back a lie to prove Himself?"

"A lie!"

"Isn't it? I don't know, I say. Only this I feel—the necessity of administering a pretty smart corrective whenever you've stuffed your congregations with that rich imagery of yours. That's why I like to follow you—humbly, sir; humbly, my brother. I'm the pill after the feast—a plain man quoting the Word as I find it."

"Jesus spoke parables, Wilson."

"And He called 'em so, sir. But He didn't preach romances. Mind, I don't say you're wrong. I say, don't give your imagination its head, or it's like to run away with you. I've known cases—men that began saints, and ended in the worst sort of self-indulgence."

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"What am I to do?"

"Steady, I say! Deal more in tonics. It'll brace you wonderful handling 'em. Come away from the river, now. Is it to serve God to take your death of cold?"

"I'm not fit for His service."

"There now—there now! You're all right so long as I'm with you. I'm your rod in pickle, sir. Geniuses like you need a practical agent—just a plain man of business that knows the interests of his employer and goes straight for 'em. Lift up as you will, sir. There's always me behind to bring 'em to their senses. Did you mark me to-night? They didn't like it—of course not. It ain't pleasant, say, to be dragged out of a warm bed and cudgelled by a moonlighter. That's what I am, the Lord's moonlighter. I gave it them hot. There was one jade—a wanton, belike—that hissed me from her place. Did you hear her?"

He clutched his prisoner's arm, and seemed to lever himself up by it that he might stare into the face beside him. But the face drew away—a ghostly blot in the darkness.

"Did I hear? I don't know. What!—I think so. Let me go, Wilson. My God—you shall!"

"Come on! Leave it, I say! I'm stronger than you. I——"

Somewhere close at hand the hatch of a low

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boozing-ken swung open, emitted a gush of light, and flapped to. On the instant rose and died a roar of voices, as if the swell of some inhuman organ had been momentarily lifted. A figure, maundering and moaning, reeled down towards the river.

Wilson, experienced in these visitations, accustomed to medicine them figuratively with a bludgeon, recognised his cue by intuition, slipped the leash, and stood with a grunt of relief to see the quarry run down.

Gerard leapt upon it.

"Where are you going?" he cried.

The woman turned upon him, swaying where she stood.

"To 'ell," she answered, with a foolish laugh. "Won't you come with me, ducky?"

"Yes, yes," said he: "if you're alone in the world, poor soul. You wouldn't want to go, I know, if there was even one left that was dependent on you."

"You lie," she said, with a filthy oath. "There's the kid that I begged for and sold myself for, and then blew the money like a sot. Dependent on me! Oh yus! Oh, my Gawd! There it lays a-starvin' and a-waitin' for me. Go and look ef yer don't believe."

"Hush! It would want to go with its mother, even if it were to hell. How can we corrupt it—damn it—before we take it with us?"

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The woman made a rake of her fingers—crouched, as if to spring.

“You—?” she began ; and stopped.

“We must not let it escape,” went on Gerard. “Think of the poor little thing crying all day in heaven for very loneliness, and its mother listening, listening in her agony and not able to go to it—never any more to comfort it, to speak to it, to hold it in her arms and keep her heart from breaking.”

The woman fell down before him, clasped his knees, shrieking and sobbing.

“You bloody angel !” she cried : “don’t let me go ! take me back to him ! Give me money for him—Oh, my Gawd, my Gawd !”

Wilson, with a grim smile, turned on his heel.

“The crisis !” he muttered to himself. “He’ll do now.”

He made his way back to the mean lodging he shared with the other ; sat a long time pondering and gnawing his nails by a fireless hearth. Presently he bethought himself, struck a match, and kindled the wood. The flame leapt up, subsided, and sulked into a glimmer. He fetched a sheet of newspaper and held it so as to make a draught. While he was thus occupied he heard Gerard enter the room.

“Well ?” said he.

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The young priest threw himself into a chair. There was silence for a while.

"Wilson, Wilson!" he cried of a sudden: "Christ was born of woman. The significance and the pathos of it, Wilson! the sacred name of mother! Oh, Wilson! is it His teaching that we should deny woman her own fulfilment?"

The man on his knees, in the act of coaxing the sticks to a glow, looked round an instant, then whisked away the sheet of paper.

"Bah!" he said. "Let it go out!"

## CHAPTER IV

JOAN had the most inscrutable eyes—blue and brown commingled. Had she won them of the sea? Somehow they suggested little pools floating with weed, shot deep down with darting streaks that might have been infinitesimal fishes. No one could quite fathom them, though they offered themselves wide for inspection. She was a little impatient of compliment, but she always remembered with merriment one paid her by a saucy little Irish buckeen whom she was showing over the church. "F'what, are ye blinkin'?" said he. "I thought I had a fly in my eye," she answered. "Musha, darlin'," he said, "it's the queen bee might lose her way there and you none the wiser."

These jewels, and another that was an amulet, were her best possessions. She had come ashore with the latter round her neck; and when she grew up she learned to cherish it as a cipher, the key to which, if discovered, might reveal her gentle origin. For she always credited herself with high descent, and accepted her condition in life, and



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even her foster-parent, on sufferance—kindly and gratefully for the most part, be it said, yet none the less on sufferance. She did not overlook her debt; and in the meantime she liquidated part of it by a generous condescension.

To do her justice, she valued the charm that lay in her breast far above that that was for all to see in her eyes. She was on too familiar terms with her own prettiness to imply a doubt of it by over-insistence. If she would use it at all, it was as means to an end. Her vanity was of a more ambitious complexion. She looked to proving her quality by the assertion of an inherent gift, a gift that did not derive from her environments. She felt some innate nobility in her veins flow towards dramatic self-expression. If that might only win her independence—if she was never to learn the truth—she might still assure herself an isolated glory—even, by implication, whatever past she desired.

An unassailable position, poor Joan, unless—unless by one incontinent small rogue with a butt-shaft.

It was said that no one could fathom Joan's eyes. James Wilson, however, sounded them to the bottom, as he thought, and could there distinguish nothing but a silt of vanity and selfishness. In truth, for some reason he was prejudiced against the girl from the outset.

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For it had come to pass that Gerard, overtaking one evening on his way from the Hall an ageing man and his foster-child (who he could not but understand were discussing with enthusiasm nothing less than his particular gifts), had improved upon the opportunity to introduce himself, and at last most sweetly and humbly to subordinate his own mission to that of St. Mark as expounded by St. Mark's admired surrogate, the foster-child herself. So the shepherd broke pasture in the Land of Green Ginger; and his dog followed him.

One day Joan conducted Wilson by his own request over the old church. All the way through he listened, grim and dour, to her stereotyped sweet patter, until he stopped her ill-manneredly enough before a mural tablet that engaged his interest because it was clean and modern and innocent of what he called the gammon of antiquity.

"He was a holy man and a charitable man," said Joan, referring to the cenotaph and wondering a little; "but his children devoured his substance, and he died of a broken heart."

"He got his deserts," said Wilson. "He wasn't no servant of the Lord to think to divide his duties with a wife. Listen to this, young woman. A man can't be a soldier of Christ and wed to the flesh at once. Every child born to him is a piece gone from his



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armour. By so much he's the weaker to resist the devil. Woe to him in the fight, then ! Woe to her, the Delilah, as seduces him, out of her own desire, to yield his strength to her guile ! ”

He looked darkly into the troubled face of the girl. Did she understand him ? Perhaps she did in part. Her attitude towards him was always conciliatory and deprecating—an attitude something significant, no doubt, considering her pride of self-confidence. It might have softened him to see how gentle she was, how unresentful of his harshness, how anxious to forestall any possible innuendo of his by humility. But he was a dog of trust. In defence of that he would worry indifferently a three days' old wolf-cub or the mother bitch.

He stared at her ; and she only hung her head silent beneath his scrutiny. He muttered something under his breath. For all his righteousness, it might by inference have been an oath.

“ Well,” he said, with an impatient stir and sniff : “ is this the 'ole show—nothin' else ? ”

“ Nothing,” she answered.

“ No vaults, no secret passages, no underground trough where these old swine lapped and guzzled ? ”

“ There are the crypts,” she said reluctantly.

“ You see, mistress ? Is you and yours, that can prevaricate over a trifle, fit mates for saints ? There

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are no underground vaults, but there are the crypts, eh? Very well; I'll have a look at 'em."

The entrance was by a little low hatch in the transept. When opened it seemed to gasp out a black miasma. Joan lit a taper from a tiny hanging lamp, and preceded her surly charge down a worn and shallow flight of steps. At the bottom their feet thudded on hollow-sounding earth.

"It is thick with graves," she said, and stamped where she stood for an echo. It answered, as if some old father disturbed in his rest were coughing underneath.

She swayed her light to and fro. A dance of uncouth vaulting shafts rocketing into a low-groined roof advanced and retired as she moved.

"They are very, very old," she said—"older than the church above. Mass was sung here by Bishop Anselm, it is said. The altar was in the recess yonder, and the nave leading to it is known as Jesus' Aisle."

"Satan's aisle, you mean; and a proper dark cellar for his worship."

"It isn't really dark, Mr. Wilson. See."

She hurried, glad of the opportunity, it seemed, to a squat, heavily built door in the further wall; turned a stubborn key—girding her whole body to the task—and tugged on an iron ring. The door swung

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open, letting in a shaft of green light that was like a sigh of release. Wilson strode to the opening and looked forth.

Two or three steps led up into a walled and antique graveyard—a forgotten covert of the dead. He mounted and gazed about him. Tree branches, worked upon a background of sky and nothing else, wrought a woven silence of the place. An iron paling enclosed the further end; and beyond that from below rose the gurgle of the estuary waters. The grass was sown with hummocks and mossy slabs, as if there some house of life had been age-long scattered to its foundations.

He redescended, with a grunt, into the crypt, and, turning, comprehended with lack-lustre eye the picture. The vault was luminous. The arches seemed to yawn, the old pillars to stretch and relax as if awakened; and in the midst the doorway framed a little landscape as bright and clean-cut as if it were thrown by a lantern on a sheet.

“Shut it,” he said harshly. “Such an old cockpit of idolatry is best left in darkness.”

“Wait till I show you the relics,” she said, palpitating to please him—tremulous, too, to cling to her little solace of daylight.

They, the relics, were in a case against the wall. They had been recovered from the ancient altar once

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upon a time, she told him, and had been preserved and classified, in the vulgar tongue, for the benefit of the curious.

Here were a fragment of the holy cross, a sandal of St. Mark's that cured foot-rot, some parings of the flesh of divers holy virgins, St. Petronilla's skull for the headache, and others. Wilson would not listen to their enumeration ; but broke with savage mockery on his cicerone—

"Ain't there nothin' here," he said, "to give back the blind their sight ? to cure desire, or to touch and burst the tumour of vanity ? There was a saint once—'Ilarius he was called—that could crumble a sea-witch to powder by no more than breathin' on her. A 'air of 'is 'ed were worth the lot."

He advanced his face as he spoke. He breathed hard, indeed, as if to illustrate his text. Joan shrunk away from him.

"A sea-witch !" she whispered.

"Ay," he said. "She were thrown up by the sea, from a wreck belike. Pelagia her name was, a wanton as tried to seduce that chaste servant of the Lord. A relic of him were worth the 'andling."

He spoke with such significance and acrimony, she could have broken into tears had she not dreaded him so.

"I don't know what you mean," she said hurriedly.

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"I have shown you everything, and—and my father will be wondering what has become of me."

He shrugged his shoulders, looking about him.

"Everything?" he said; "I don't know about that. What's that gallows-looking thing in the corner there?"

"It's the windlass of the old well—the Moaning Well, it's called."

"Why?"

"Some say because it was sore labour to the poor monks to wind up the heavy bucket; some, because there's a gut runs from it deep down into the creek, and through it the tide or the wind cries at times. You may sit here quiet, and all of a sudden hear it like a dog's bay at night."

He walked across, and looked down over the low wall rim, into the very gullet of secrecy fearful and unfathomable. He thought he heard the cluck of water at a nameless depth. It was suggestive of a throat gulping to clear itself; and immediately a whine, a moan, that swelled out and died, rose from the pit.

The sound, reverberating through that vaulted silence, was spectral to a degree. It had no perceptible effect upon the man who listened to it. He did not start or alter his position until the last scuttling little echo had found covert in the roof. Then he rose and

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settled his humped coat with a shift of his shoulders, and looked for his companion. She was already gone up the steps, and stood at the top holding the hatch open for him. As he emerged, she entered the church and hurried before him.

"Wait," he called after her. "Ain't you goin' to shut the door down there?"

"It doesn't matter till by-and-by," she faltered. "It's the sweeter for a little fresh air now and then."

"Ay," he muttered, following her: "if I'd my way I'd sweeten it with what blew from the wilderness and 'smote the four corners of the 'ouse'!"

And indeed he would; for there is no more conscientious Nihilist than the gospel reactionary.

She glanced round at him fearfully as he pursued her. Their footsteps whispered and clanged in the empty building. But, once in the open air, she let him come up with her, and together they entered the old book-shop that was but a few paces away.

There Gerard awaited his comrade. He stood at the counter, talking to Stephen; and he turned as the two came in. Joan hurried by—passed into the room beyond. The young missionary's face flamed and fell, as if a draught had taken it. It was white as he addressed his colleague—set into an expression half smile, half frown.

"Well, Wilson," he said, "I suppose you have



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improved upon the occasion to read Miss Brotherhood a lesson on superstition ? ”

Wilson had stopped on the threshold. He was twisting up his beard and biting it.

“On witchcraft,” he said shortly.

“Is that what you made of the well ? ”

Wilson did not answer. He stood pondering. Suddenly he turned to the old bookseller.

“I were tellin’ her of the ’oly man, ’Ilarius, you may have ’eard mention of,” he said.

Stephen smiled and shook his head.

“He travelled in many lands,” said Wilson, “preaching the Word. He stripped himself of all earthly interests and desires that he might do it thorough. It’s the only way, sir. He that would act like the Master, must make himself ‘as a chaste virgin to Christ.’ ’Ilarius was sworn to continence—as we are, sir ; as me and Mr. Latimer is.”

Gerard put his knuckles, with a quick nervous movement, to his lips. Wilson thought it seemly, apparently, to emphasise his statement.

“As me and Mr. Latimer is,” he repeated, after a little pause ; and Stephen nodded his head again.

“It’s correct and proper, I’m sure,” he said, “The army of the Almighty wants no camp-followers.”

“Right,” said Wilson, smacking fist into palm.

“And a curse on her as would seduce the soldier from





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his allegiance. Such a trollop—a water-witch she was—thought to practise on 'Ilarius; but he breathed on her by command of 'Eaven, and she broke into dust before his face."

He addressed Gerard directly for the first time.

"Brother," he said, "to-morrow we must carry our mission to fresh pastures."

MERLE to his mate,  
Hid in a briar,  
Chuckled sedate :  
"Prithee hop nigher !  
What does he stare at—Why does he wait ?—  
That fellow glum as a friar ?"

"Tchuck ! Bobolink !"  
Quo' she so soft :  
"The clothes-line hangs in the garden croft.  
Smocks and little frilled tuckers jink  
Over the wall ;  
And here is a rogue that would filch 'em all."  
Quo' she so soft.

Merle on the grass  
Under the briar :  
"Tuckers, my lass,  
*He* can't desire.  
Yet, in his eyes, by the merlés' mass,  
Twinkles a thievish fire."

"Well, sir, and well !"  
Quo' she so pert—  
"If not tuckers, why then a shirt.  
A thief he is, as it's plain to tell,  
Holding aloof,  
Wi' his eyes on the window under the roof."  
Quo' she so pert.

Thoughtful the merle,  
Winking and blinking :  
"Silence, my girl,  
Tchuck ! I am thinking.  
Who, when the frost clouds break and birl,  
Brings crumbs and water for drinking ?"

"The old man's dearie,"  
Quo' she, quo she.  
"Tucker and smock and frill," said he,  
"And lips as sweet as the cherry.  
Come kiss me, chuck !  
I know the fruit that he waits to pluck !"  
Quo' he, quo' he.

## CHAPTER V

NOT to-morrow or to-morrow again; and in the meantime, as it appeared, whatever Gerard had breathed upon his Pelagia it was not destruction.

One morning the snow had all melted; the birds were singing; balmy and sweet air had brought in the Day. Down in St. Mark's crypt it was as if this gentle goddess were standing on the steps by the open door that gave on the graveyard, wreathing into a story the echoes that were blown to her along the shattered pavement within. She seemed (to one glowing dreamer, at least) to enter presently, her hands full of seedlings, and to glance upon the well rim, as though she pondered the advisability of committing at last to its barren crevices some little bine of the spring flax. For surely at length had broken the dawn of peace fruitful and triumphant, since its light had penetrated into the cellars of the underworld? Could darkness ever prevail again? In the green thickets of this dreamer's—this man's—mind tranquillity lay like a ruined statue of unrest. So stupefied were his nerves of pain, he could not realise

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their existence. Their very memory, dependent on their own actions, slept with themselves.

And this because light is the great peacemaker ; because the morning sang softly as a young dryad about its work of sowing and planting. What if last night the rain prickled on the window glass ; what if the forecast for to-day were of wind and tempest ! The weather is still so plausible a baggage that she has only to smile on us waking to be called a constant maid. And, if first love be the waker to clean-washed skies and honeyed air and greening buds, how shall not life stretch before its eyes, a shining perspective contracting to the world's edge ; and at its vanishing-point a star !

In this mood, drunk with rapture, Gerard stood dreaming beneath the pavement of the ancient church. His eyes were glazed with a happy pre-occupation. He had surrendered himself, with a delicious sense of relaxation after strain, to the influences of an atmosphere that was suddenly all melodious and fragrant and caressing. He was committed to the hands of the Inevitable—the blind demon that will torture till pain becomes an ecstasy.

The old vaults seemed full of murmuring light. Shutting his eyes to indulge his fancy, Gerard could hear the dust, disturbed by his dryad at the well rim, rain into the water deep below with a whispering

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patter. Presently he saw a blackbird perch in the sunshine on the steps without. There it sat in the flame like a little black kettle, till the warmth took it, and its throat began to bubble and sing. He listened—and all in a moment it flickered and was gone. Something had silenced this fanciful music of love's hearth.

"Latimer," said a rough voice behind him.

He paused an instant before he wheeled about. In the instant, his nerves were awake again and desperately stiffening to some shock of onset. He turned to the voice.

"How did you know I was down here, Wilson?"

"Because I love my brother," said the man.

Gerard giggled foolishly.

"Isn't it the very house of peace?" said he.

"But more in my way, when all's said, than in yours."

"I'm glad to 'ear its peace you're after, Latimer, and nothin' worse. It's not to be found in my company, seemin'ly."

"Is that a reproach, Wilson?"

"Not if your 'art acquits you, sir."

"Why, it doesn't altogether. I own it. I have avoided you of late."

"Why?"

"Because—Wilson, there is something makes

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cowards of us. I thought to storm heaven in my pride; and God sent His tiniest gnat to sting me in the ear and madden me. If I have fallen, I have learnt. Now I will cry shame on the hypocrite—I will cry shame. Wilson, you must go on alone."

The other gave back slowly a pace or two, as if before some resistless pressure. Then he checked himself and strode forward violently, his face alight with passion.

"Breathe on her, 'Ilarius!" he whispered hoarsely: "breathe on her!"

"She would break into flower, not dust," cried Gerard in a febrile voice.

"I have cried on the Almighty," said Wilson, in hurried, thick speech, "that this might not be. I have prayed to Him, yea even while I scorned to misdoubt my brother, to 'deliver thee from the strange woman which flattereth with her words.'"

"You cannot understand—not you—how one may even worship God the better, for seeing Him reflected in the mirror of a woman's love."

"Love! a mirror! Fool—she sees herself in it; and you—not God, but a goddess—the beastly 'eathen creature that stole His name and entered into His kingdom. Blasphemer! pause on the brink! Remember your vows to wait a virgin on the Christ."

"I have taken none."



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Wilson choked ; drew back again ; fought to command himself. There fell a minute's silence.

"So," said he presently, in a forced, trembling voice ; "you desert your trust ?"

"I transfer it, Wilson. There are souls to save in Frimlington. God suffer me only to confirm what our mission has begun. The curate in charge here is sick and needs a holiday. I have agreed to represent him for a term."

"Liar !"

He uttered the word fiercely ; then of a sudden his expression and his whole manner softened.

"Gerard," he said, "you 'aven't taken 'em in so many words ; but didn't the dedication of self-sacrifice include the greatest of all ? Oh, my brother, don't desert your mission ! Don't leave me to stumble on alone—me, the old, stern, 'ot-'eaded smiter as, following in your footsteps, learned himself to with'old his 'and and preach cleanliness through love. This Joan——"

"Yes, Joan, Wilson."

"My brother, you won't forsake me ?"

There was something like a rough sob in his voice. The young man gasped and put his hand to his face. In the silence the blackbird sang in the old garden of mortality ; the flutter of a footstep sounded on the pavement above.



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"Gerard!" cried Wilson, in a tone of anguish: "I find more bitter than death the woman whose 'art is snares and nets!"

"Wilson, Wilson, God leads through love!"

"Spiritual and divine, sir. Not the desires of the flesh. To dally with a fancy, and listen unregardin' to the lost souls cryin' for help in the street. To——"

"Silence, I say!"

"To make over your mission like any rubbishin' toy to a petulant child——"

"I will hear no more—not a word. God will justify me."

Fury leapt in the other on the instant. He bellowed denunciation till the vault thundered.

"But not her, I say—not her. 'Ell gapes for the apostate, and its midmost for one as thinks to warm her vanity at fire stole from 'eaven. One flesh you shall be—welded together by fire and sharin' a double torment for ever and ever."

He turned about, as if to go; then wrenched himself round again, and roared, "remember that 'when your fear cometh as desolation and your destruction as a whirlwind'!"

As he hurried away, gnashing his teeth, he drove upon a girl who had just descended the steps from the church, and who stood in amazement, holding her





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hand to her breast. At that, he turned once more violently and threw up his arm.

"Liar!" he shrieked: "Blasphemer! Liar!"

For an instant it looked as if he were going to strike her—Gerard sprang forward;—but he ascended furiously and was gone.

Joan sped across the floor with a sob of terror.

"What was he saying?" she said: "what was he saying?"

Gerard put a hand to his forehead.

"A recreant! a recreant!" he cried. "Saying? What *was* he saying?—A stern, gloomy, half divine fellow!"

"Gerard—he frightens me. Gerard—and you do."

"I?"

"Why do you look so strange? Ah! I know. He wants to take you with him, away from me."

"Yes."

"Why don't you go, then?"

"Joan!"

"You repent of your bargain. I can see it in your face."

"Joan!"

"It is a great sacrifice, I know; me so poor and nameless, and you—Gerard, you might have put it more kindly; but I forgive you. You shame me so, suggesting that it was I did the courting."

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"Joan, this is madness!"

"How cruel of you to say so. It was what I always said. What have I done to be treated as if I were a designing hussy? I have never done any wrong; and you are too good for me. I didn't think you would so take advantage of my inexperience. It is not a noble part to play, Gerard."

"In God's name, Joan——"

"I don't blame you, Mr. Latimer. You are a saint, and you have the right to amuse yourself at the expense of a poor trusting girl. Of course you never meant anything. What has Mr. Wilson been saying against me? I never flirted in my life, Gerard. If you loved me as you pretend, you would have defended me against such an infamous charge, instead of allowing yourself to be swayed by a will that is so much stronger than your own. But I'm perfectly aware of the goodness of your resolution to remain a bachelor. To be saddled with the thought of a wife while you preached would be a stumbling-block in your mouth. Besides, she might object to your leaving a sweetheart in every town you visited, and——"

"Joan—let me speak. You shall."

"I'm sure I give you every opportunity; but you won't take it. Are you silent because your conscience reproaches you? I am the one to blame, Gerard."



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You are quite right ; you have done no wrong, and I forgive you."

"Listen to me. You break my heart."

"Why did you say, then, you repented of the step you had taken ?"

"I never did."

"Didn't you really ? I won't cry. Be reasonable, dearest ; that is all I ask you. These misunderstandings are so easily avoided if one is reasonable. How you must hate me. First Mr. Wilson and then myself making me out detestable. Gerard ! Aren't you going to kiss me ? Oh, oh, oh !"

*Et hoc genus omne.*

Love is the unguent to all passions but itself. To lay love on love is only to excite love. But it is an emollient salve to other irritations. Therefore these two were no long time in healing of their distress. Presently they were seated entwined on the sedilium beside the ruined altar. It was a bussing spot, cool in gloom, but with the picture of the luminous vault and doorway to inform it with the very climate of romance.

"Gerard, how you love me !"

"Oh, my queen, so much, so terribly ! To hold your hand ; to touch your hair, your lips, your eyes ! Your eyes, Joan. They are little pools left by the tide of love. I see the lotus leaves underneath, and

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the sunlight dripping between them upon patens of sand ; and the lip of a flower lifts, and something—an opal streak—darts and is gone. Only the water clouds a moment, and in the moment there is a fog of sleep in my brain.”

“Thank you, Mr. Latimer. What wonderful eyes, to be sure ; and what would an oculist say to them ?”

“Joan, have you ever stood in the upper storey of a mill and heard the wheels thundering below ? I stand so exalted, and listen to the throbbing and whirring of my own heart. My whole being seems shaken by my heart. It works suddenly with a passion I never thought it capable of. But still I climb and climb, and the voice (is it God’s voice, Joan ?) calling to me from the basement of the mill to come down and feed the loom grows faint and fainter. I shall be out of earshot of it very soon. Yet, while it is still heard—Joan, *must* we go on playing this part of concealment and dissimulation ?”

“Gerard—no ; look me in the face, sir. How many times more ? My father’s great designs for his waif and his belief in her ! Would confession win him from those ? I think it would break his heart, rather. You don’t know, as I do, his prejudice against poor lovesick clergymen. It is the one thing in which he



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is intolerant. And he received you as he did because he understood you to be a sworn bachelor." (So much, Mr. Latimer, for that divinity that doth hedge the celibate!) "Some day, Gerard, some day when I have justified his belief in me—then will be the time to confess, and assert my independence. But now—O Gerard, have you no faith in me?"

"Such as I had in myself, Joan. It is all transferred to you."

"Will you take me a theatre, sir, and give me the opportunity to prove myself?"

"Joan! *I*, the poor priest, just awakened to the measure of the pittance upon which I must satisfy my wants?"

"You see, sir? Is that the measure of *his* ambitions, do you think? Dearest—there! I knew you wouldn't misread me. Hush, dearest! let me go. And, besides, I am afraid of Mr. Wilson; I want to know that leagues separate you and him before—before——"

"My sweetheart—my one sweetheart. How from all the world could you surrender your proud destiny into the hands of a poor, struggling, un-gifted priest?"

"All the world, Gerard? This dull little corner of it? But it *was* destiny, I think. Why should we have met otherwise? It is not us betrothed, Gerard,

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but our children—our arts, yours and mine. Perhaps it was preordained, this end to your mission—that you should recognise the poor little sprout in the wilderness, and turn aside from your work to tend it, and water it, and teach it to realise itself. Is it wrong to think so? But I am only your loving disciple, sir, and you will see some day how I will do honour to my master's teaching."

"Woman, do with me what you will. I am soft wax in your hands. And we are only betrothed, Joan; and how am I to live through the interval?"

"Do you want me very much?"

She took his head upon her bosom, and kissed it and murmured to him. As he lay, he put up his hand to her neck, and drew forth by its string the amulet that she always wore concealed.

"Will you give this to me, Joan?"

"Would you like to have it, Gerard?"

"Quick! put it on me, before it is cold. Its warmth is part of yourself."

"There!—Now I am no longer a princess. You have my patent of nobility, sir—but I must have yours in exchange."

"Mine?"

"Where is that Royal Humane Society's medal?"

"Joan!"

"Oh! I know all about it" (she put up her little

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finger, which he caught and devoured). "That told me, sir—in French, too, which I can read a little, though you mayn't believe it. Daddy Steenie taught me—all for love. Would you go so far?—*Mon pe-tit doigt*—what is it?—Never mind. Perhaps my foster-father has been as good a friend to me as Mr. Wilson has been to you. But *your* friend would think he had served you badly if he could have foreseen how his tale of your bravery would have affected one listener. I heard it all, Gerard. It made me cry. But I don't think I should have cried if it had been a girl and not a boy that you saved. Will you give it me in exchange, sir?"

"Yes, Joan."

"Now, there is a grateful princess. And I ought to be grateful to Mr. Wilson, and I am only horribly frightened of him. Gerard, tell me,—what did he call me?"

"Does it matter, Joan?"

"If it did, I shouldn't want to know."

"Let us forget all about it."

"Then you must tell me first. I can never forget what I haven't heard."

"He called you a petulant child."

"How detestable of him. I'll never forgive him—never."

"He said—no, I can't tell you."



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"Ah ! you don't love me if you won't give me the chance to defend myself."

"He said—the malignant creature—that you wished to warm your vanity at fire stolen from heaven."

"Did he ? Well, after all, he might have said much worse things than that. I could have told him some, if he'd asked me."

"Joan, you're a darling to take it so. You lift a load from my mind."

This was that sublimation of bathos—generically, love—for which the symbol is PP, or passion and paradox. So these two cooed together and exchanged trinkets and lip-wisdom. The blackbird sang without ; the old arches stretched and slept in the glow ; not once did the Moaning Well give tongue.

That night, when Gerard laid his head on his pillow, he thought, I will not think, and, thinking, thought. Was he healthily in love, then ; for love takes no thought of thought ?



## CHAPTER VI

ONE February morning Stephen and Michael were occupied in the parlour of No. 7 over Michael's play. The compositor was, for the present, of the unemployed. He had got his heroine into so compromising a situation that he had been obliged to leave his own to succour her. He was always a disinterested paladin to this same Dulcinea, and Stephen felt a periodic sense of honour in being permitted to entertain and keep him during his bouts of Quixotism. Besides, was not the play, when finished, to be Joan's opportunity—or Joan the play's?—Stephen did not quite know which. And in the meantime Joan had ceased to grow, long before the tragedy had realised two-thirds of its inches.

It was a tragedy, indeed. To make it hold together every passion was cemented with blood. It was called, to begin with, the "Jester of Death's Head," and it turned upon the intrigue of a Countess with her Lord's Fool. Motley—according to the synopsis, now many years old—was to be murdered, and his head was to be preserved by poor Amorette in, it was understood, a

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pot of July stocks. It might have been basil, save on the score of originality. Amorette herself was to be subsequently smothered in her bed by her Count and master. The title and the plot were Michael's own ; but there had been much carping over details in family conclave. Such, of course, is the duty intellect must pay on its costly imports. Common sense has an offensive way of disputing genius's right of exemption from the taxes itself is heir to.

At the very outset much was objected to the title. Stephen was diffident, but insistent, on its piratical, not to say its public-house suggestiveness. Joan offered, alternatively, "The Lady's Page" (which was rejected as smacking too much of the *Fashionable* column in a weekly paper); Joshua, "The Damned Fool" (which, of course, was out of the question). Stephen, again, was apprehensive that a ribald audience might misconceive a poetical situation, and make vulgar capital of Amorette's keeping her lover's head in a stock-pot. Michael credited the public generally with something better than an itch for cheap buffoonery ; and Joshua endorsed an opinion that was in the nature of a rebuke to the Joan faction.

Mr. Stillbody, indeed, resented Stephen's exaltation of his waif at the expense of the family genius. He was loyal to the degree that he would permit no disparagement of any member of his little circle by



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outsiders ; but in his ponderous heart he thought Joan vain and selfish ; and he fancied he detected in her and her foster-father's attitude towards Michael and his work a humorous toleration that reflected upon himself as the playwright's most stolid champion. Sometimes, being a man slow to ignite to repartee, he would explode in the most startling way long after the action was over. Then he would roar that if he could only catch the girl laughing in her sleeve at him, he would smother her in it. He went that length, and yet he was proud of her, too. Only he would not have her play stepmother in his family of motherless old boys.

"I wouldn't do it, Michael," said Stephen. "I wouldn't make the head speak from the pot, if I were you. The audience would be sure to call out on it for a Pepper's ghost or a conjuring trick."

This was that very form of criticism, tickling with secret laughter, smug with self-superiority, most wounding to conscious art. It was Michael's way, when protest seemed incompatible with dignity, to assume a glassy expression and make apparently preoccupied and totally irrelevant statements, that were rather in the nature of counter-charges than replies.

"I give a penny to a blind man as I come up here," said he.

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"But, Michael, boy——"

"It's a terrible thing to be denied the light, Stephen—a'most as bad as wanting your dinner."

"Can't you make a whole ghost of it, now? Think of Hamlet's father."

"And where's Mr. Latimer?"

"I don't know. Why should I?"

"Why should you, Stephen, of course; and why should I? I see Joan were in the dumps, that's all; and so I guessed Mr. Latimer was gone away somewhere."

"He may be, and he mayn't. What should it matter to Joan?"

"You see, the body's buried in a wood and the head in a flower-pot. It would want a precious long ghost to stretch between them two. You'll excuse me, brother. You're a deal cleverer than me, no doubt; but perhaps you ain't made a like study of the dramatic unities. Now a man don't grow after he's dead; so why should his ghost? But his voice is a abstract quality; and a abstract quality has an indefinite reach."

"You're right, Michael, I daresay. Michael, what makes you think Joan dismal because—because of Mr. Latimer's being out of the way?"

"Now, that's the solution of the difficulty, in my opinion. (What makes me think Joan dismal? My



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good hat, brother ! if I'd another penny I'd give it to you. I would indeed.) Here's the situation that's been a'bothering me for a week, and if I haven't resolved it, it's you that's to blame."

"The situation ?—Joan ?"

"Who said Joan ? For goodness' sake condescend to think of other people's claims on you for a moment. I'm alludin' to the Countess."

"Oh ay," said Stephen. He passed his hand across his forehead in a dazed manner. "Well, her husband can't make head or tail of the flower-pot until it speaks ; and then of course he knows which it is."

Michael glanced up suspiciously. Was here again some facetious allusion ?

"The question is," he said snappishly, "if it's to be the head or the baby."

"Gracious goodness, Michael ! you aren't going to produce a baby from the flower-pot too ?"

Michael came erect, drew a long breath, and turned rigid.

"Have you been listenin' to one word I've said, sir ? Wasn't all my difficulty that the baby was intended to compromise its mother by mentionin' its father's name ?"

"Yes—oh yes, of course."

"Well ; how can a baby speak when it isn't turned one ?"

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"H'm ! Can't you make it a sort of infant phenomenon ? or leap year, eh ?—no, that won't do."

A jangle at the outer door announced Mr. Stillbody. He entered, a portentous and impressive figure, habited in a cricket cap, a muffler, and two greatcoats, whereof the inner hung below the outer, like a Highlander's kilt.

"Joshua !" exclaimed Stephen, with some sense of relief. "Why, what brings you here at this time of day, old fellow ?"

"News," said Mr. Stillbody briefly.

Both brothers rose from their task, and stood expectant.

"Where's Joan ?" said the barber.

"After her dooties, sir," said Michael : "after her dooties, showin' a party round the church."

Joshua sat down before the half-dead fire, loosened his cravat, and made a show of warming his hands.

"Very well," he said. "I'll wait till she comes in. Great news wants a woman by to make it greater."

Michael flitted about hungrily ; then sat down also, and bit his nails.

"My goodness, Joshua !" he murmured.

There fell a silence.

"Thomas Bunce killed a pig yesterday," said the barber suddenly.

"Is that it ?" said Michael, with an anxious titter.

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"I wish I seed a chance of a spare-rib comin' my way."

"They say," said Joshua, "that Mary Pocket's so took grace of hearing Mr. Latimer, that she won't be seen entering a public, but orders what she wants from the grocer's."

"A wonderful man!" said Michael, with a side glance at Stephen; "and a wonderful coxin' way with women. He'll work miracles with 'em, so I'm told. I question that some day he won't be able to make the blind see."

And, discharging this last vindictive bolt, Michael recovered his normal habit of affection for his brother. He was really concerned to see, by the other's distressed expression, how well his little spiteful stroke had told.

"But, after all," said he stoutly, "a bachelor sworn to the Lord has a licence to court, I suppose; or the maids wouldn't believe in his mission."

Joan entered on the word.

"What mission?" said she. "I suppose you consider it yours, uncle Michael, to turn the room into a pot-house at twelve o'clock in the morning."

Michael put his pipe covertly on the table. Joan with an angry jerk threw back her hood (her face, as if wind-blown, was for once quite pink), and knelt down by the hearth.



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"And the fire near black, daddy," she said. "How can you be so inconsiderate?"

She took up the poker, with a little vicious hustling of Mr. Stillbody's legs, and beat on the coals. She was evidently ruffled by more than the wind.

"I'm an unthinking body, Joan, and that's the truth," said Stephen ruefully. "Girlie," he said, "Joshua here has been keeping us waiting till you came, to tell us great news."

"Has he?—I saw he was as full of something as a bladder."

Mr. Stillbody was a man of such deliberate digestion that he must chew the cud of a remark twenty times before he could assimilate it.

"Lard," he said presently. "Is that what you meant?"

"I meant nothing," said Joan.

"Oh!" said Joshua, and ruminated again.

"Now," said Michael, moved beyond endurance, "we're all listening, old fellow."

"You're listenin' to nothing, old fellow," said Joshua, in serene offence. "How do you like it?"

"Well, it suits me," said Joan indifferently. "I'm tired."

Stephen was commiseration at once.

"You've been worried again, my pet. Is that it?"

"Life's all a worry, dad. I'm sick of repeating to



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people the eternal story of those old stones. I want to make history—not to teach it. I want to be recognised and accepted for all I'm worth ; and here I have to satisfy my hungriest ambitions with six-pennyworths of cockney patronage."

She was in a very odd mood ; she turned suddenly on the company, with eyes that looked dilated and black.

"What right had you, you little old clan of shop-keepers, to claim me and bring me up for one of yourselves ?"

They all stared aghast.

"It's hateful !" cried Joan, stamping with her knee as she knelt : "it's hateful ! There was one young gentleman that seemed to be laughing at me all the time. Why should I be forced to submit, through no choice of my own, to——"

She caught sight of her foster-father's face, and rose so hurriedly as to rip her skirt with her foot. In a moment her arms were round Stephen's neck, and she was upbraiding herself between passion and tears.

"I didn't mean it," she cried. "I deserve that you should flog me to death. How dare you look at me like that, sir ? It was true, every word ; and you'll never be able to forgive me again for such spiteful story-telling !"

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Her voice sank to a liquid whisper. Her poor little nose was pink now on its own account. She tightened her hold.

"Don't let them hear, daddy," she pattered—"don't let them hear. I was a wicked beast, and I didn't mean it, and I am very, very sorry."

She switched the hair from her eyes, and looked over Stephen's shoulder and smiled wetly on the lowering but bewildered Mr. Stillbody.

"What is your news, Joshua?" she said. "Please tell it me—please do."

Michael eased away his burden of dejection in a jubilant sigh. Joshua himself, who had been swelling like a great indiarubber ball put down before the fire, was fain to compromise with his outraged dignity lest, presuming upon it, he should burst. He rose, literally, to the occasion, and, standing with his back to the grate, delivered himself.

"Sir John Swayne have gone aloft—in the city of Paris."

At that he stopped, and closed his eyes, like one who caps a debate to which he has not contributed with the essential word. Michael, who had been hugging himself and cracking his finger-joints as if he were trying on tight gloves, fell limp and motionless on the instant.

"Dear, dear," said Stephen, after a blank pause ;



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then he added, with some confused association of ideas in his mind, "and in a ship, too? Do you mean he's dead, Joshua, by—by falling out of the rigging?"

Michael brightened. The oracle opened its eyes, and looked at nothing with injurious disdain.

"Sir John Swayne," said he, "have died in the city of Paris, which, to those who have no claim to be called scholars, is commonly known—perhaps mistakenly—for the metropolis of France."

"Dear, dear," said Stephen again. "Such a kind and affable gentleman? Wasn't he, Joan? Wasn't he, Michael? I'm truly sorry to hear it, Joshua; I am indeed."

Mr. Stillbody lifted his whole body from the hips and let it resettle.

"One!" he said. "But there's two to follow."

"Uncle Michael," said Joan, "you'll wriggle a hole in your clothes."

Joshua closed his eyes once more, and smiled, actually, as if deprecating some prospective applause.

"The registry office in Stanborough town," said he—and stopped.

Joan stared at the speaker. She quietly loosened her hold, and letting one hand linger on Stephen's shoulder, rested the other on the table.

"What about it?" said the bookseller.

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"Were struck by lightning during the thunderstorm yesterday and brunt to cinders."

He had secured some real interest at last. Nobody spoke ; which was proof of it.

"Moreover," said he, "the registrar, Mr. Humby, the registrar of Bewlington, Mr. Barnes, and a couple of aged paupers from the work'us—all of which was in the 'ouse at the time—were crushed in the collapse thereof and brunt to unintelligible ashes ; as well as all books, records, and registers appertaining thereto."

Stephen looked round hastily, and whipped out an arm.

"Steady, Joshua, steady !" said he.

Joan, with a sick little smile, gently put away the proffered help. Her face had gone as white as milk.

"It's horrible !" she muttered—"horrible ! Is it all said ?"

"All but this : that it's supposed a weddin' by licence had took place there shortly before the interestin' catastrophe, which accounts for the presence of the registrar of Bewlington, and the paupers for witnesses. But none may know now for certain, all dockiments bein' consoomed."

"I think," said Joan faintly—"it's made me feel quite sick and funny—I think I don't want to hear any more, daddy."

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She rocked where she stood, with that same foolish, weak smile on her lips. "Daddy!" she whimpered imploringly.

Stephen, his face full of distress and pity, put an arm, nervous with sudden strength, about her, and helped her away to the stair-foot. At the door he dwelt a moment, and slewed his head about.

"Joshua," said he—"Joshua—damn you for a credulous ass to believe such nonsense!" he roared.

The two vanished. Michael stared, gasped, and rubbed his hands.

"*I* believe it, Joshua!" he cried; "*I* believe it! But weak is the digestion of women. Now, I call that news to give one a appetite."

Down in the crypt two people looked into one another's white faces.

"To think," whispered Joan, "when we were hurrying back in the storm and rain, that *that* was happening!"

"Poor souls! O Joan, poor souls!"

"We were the cause—with all their sins upon them. Gerard, you are a servant of God—will they be forgiven because of that? tell me! tell me!"

"They died doing their duty."

"But they were witnesses to what? Was it *our*

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duty? If *we* stand condemned, then they—What a hideous beginning! There is no going back or undoing. There——”

“Joan—my wife! in God’s name don’t hint that you could wish it undone!”

“I didn’t say it. But to start so horribly! Gerard, are we even married?”

She stood rigid, grudging to breathe—looking at him with fearful eyes. He clutched at her, in a sudden spasm of terror.

“We swore it before witnesses, Joan. If they are gone, it is only to testify to our oath before God the sooner.”

“Before God?” she said, with a shiver. “If you have offended Him! If this is His awful rebuke to you for——”

“For what—Joan, for what?”

“Mr. Wilson—he said something—I didn’t dare to think who he meant.”

“It was a lie.”

“The water-witch!—and you—a priest, and content to be married in a room, before those old men in their common clothes. And afterwards!—what he said you were sworn to. But I believed your word. Mr. Wilson——”

“He lied, I tell you.”

She buried her face in her hands, then in a moment

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looked up again. Her eyes had taken a sudden light of passion.

"I have never had a soul to help or advise me," she cried. "All my life I have been in a false position. There is no love worth the name that is without strength to insist. If there is wrong here, it is you led me astray, not I you."

At that she broke down, and the tears came. And the man she wounded had at least the temporary will to stand aloof, feeling the bitterness of ungenerosity stiffen his nerves as if in the forestroke of death. But it was only a passing rally. In a little while his lips began to tremble and his eyes filled, and he held out his hands like one groping in the dark.

"The fault is all mine," he said. "I think I would do anything, give up anything, to win and have you. Don't cry so, in pity's name. If you are so grieved, so lost—if you think God asks atonement of us for this—this deed of ours; Joan, dear—Joan, do you hear? let us confess everything—let me go to Stephen here, now, and tell him, and claim you before the world."

She was quiet; her tears had ceased; but her hands still covered her face.

"Let me," said Gerard beseechingly. "I don't lack courage for that at least, Joan. And we will



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go out into the world together, and win our pardon through good works, you and I, dearest; and our union shall be blessed through our deeds. Shepherd and shepherdess, Joan, only folding our poor flocks, and counting glory and ambition for less than vanity. Oh, my wife! to prove to you how I believe in and love you for what you are—not for that brilliant thing you might be, if you chose!”

She had listened mutely. Now she looked up, and drew a little away, and spoke in an even voice, though a sob caught it now and again.

“For what I am? I don’t think you can understand me, after all. Why, I am pretty, I know; and I like to be pretty because that is so much gain to my art. But there are fifty pretty girls in the town; and most of them are good at home, which I am not; and you know I am not. Was it only my face you fell in love with, Gerard? and did you think I stood to win you by my looks? Then your friend, to be sure, knew you better than I did.”

“Joan!” he cried in agony; but she went on—

“If the fault is yours, as you say, why should the atonement be all mine? You would not sacrifice your mission. You would take me with you to lighten the burden of it. But you would sacrifice mine, without a thought of what it means to me, and call that atoning for us both. I am so sorry. I

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believed—I really believed that what brought us together was a sympathy—a sort of sympathy of hopes and aims, Gerard, though our methods were different. And what are we to do now?”

“I am blind, Joan. Come to me!”

“Hush! My poor gift, Gerard;—whatever it is, God gave it me. To hide it—to put it away—is that what He would expect? or, wouldn’t He ask rather that I should so use it as to justify His generosity to me? That, I think, would be the real atonement.”

“I was wrong,” he said faintly. “I will do whatever you will.”

“I am afraid of you,” she said.

Her voice was as soft as snow. He stood away, shivering, from the chill of it.

“Not of me! What can I say or do? I only wanted to fall in with your mood, as I thought.”

“O Gerard! isn’t that a proof of such weakness? I think, after all, you had best go with Mr. Wilson for a time.”

“My God!—Joan, you are cruel, cruel. You won’t even say what you want of me.”

“You should know, I think. This marriage—it is only a shadow to lean upon—a dreadful shadow now, Gerard? It will be different when I have proved myself and won the right to my own choice of action.

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But, now—there is no evidence ; and without it what construction would people put on our——”

“Very well. I won’t breathe a word. Is that all, Joan?”

There came to them a sound of voices from the church above. She moved a step forward. The frost had melted from her voice.

“Don’t you understand that this secret binds us more than ever? S-sh! Hark to the well! Quick, I must go. These horrible people—they were to lunch in the town and come here again. Gerard, are my eyes red? Gerard—when my time came—if I were known to be a married woman—a dull Joan with a Darby!—it would rob the occasion of every bit of interest and romance. And perhaps you would be ashamed, instead of proud, of me—as you shall be. There—put my hair back, sir. I was unkind to you. But I’m afraid—Oh, I’m so afraid you’ll never understand me.”

Did he, indeed, even now—now that the real motive for the secret suddenly stood up, stripped of speciousness?—Well, the last thing a woman will burden herself with on a cloudy day is a waterproof, and the last thing Love will carry with him on a fine one is his understanding.

## CHAPTER VII

STEPHEN and Michael, under the immediate inspiration of the tragic, were returned to their task ; Joshua was gone back to his business. Yet Mr. Stillbody, though discharged of his message, remained in a condition so electric that for hours he kept popping (voltaically) into No. 7, sometimes to ease himself of an abstraction, sometimes only to gasp and vanish. During these seizures—that seemed purely cataleptic and beyond his control—he might appear with a razor adorned with a fraction of a soapy beard, or perhaps with a recently-clipped lock of hair with which he would absently brush his nose as he stood and stared. Then the applicability to himself of some distant booming or roaring, in which his own name figured in melancholy or despairing vocative, might occur to him, and he would withdraw backwards as if from the presence of royalty, and return to his uncompleted customer.

It may have been his thunderstruck condition that made him only particularly sensitive to atmospheric excitability ; for that such held was demonstrated

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early in the afternoon by the sudden breaking of a storm that whipped and crackled over the town and made mire of its streets. At that he again issued from his lair, in a sort of magnetic trance, and marching, heedless of the downpour, a few paces, was apathetically interested to observe, though not deterred from pursuing, a little party of visitors—two women and two men—that Joan was at the moment hurriedly conducting to the shelter of her foster-father's shop.

Stephen and Michael, at the parlour table within, had arisen in some embarrassment.

"Daddy," said Joan (she looked flushed and nervous), "these ladies and gentlemen have to wait an hour for their train, and——"

"To be sure," put in the most important-looking of the party; "an hour, to be sure. And you have books and curios, your daughter tells us; and perhaps these will help to wile away the time."

She was like a magnificent brigand, large, fair, and blue-eyed. Her face was scumbled with powder so white that her mouth looked a black gash in it. Her hat nodded plumes; diamonds were in her ears; when she threw back her cloak of fur and satin, her stomacher shone as hard and sleek as a cuirass. There were many inches of her, but not one that betrayed a weak spot.

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Now she appeared by so much the commanding figure, that it was with something like consternation Stephen saw her submit without any protest to being unceremoniously put aside by the other lady of the group, a little scant shrewd-mouthed woman of fifty, dressed like an Anglican sister, but with eyes as bright as a rabbit's in a sallow face, and a rebellious crimp in her bandeaux of black hair.

"*Toute peine mérite salaire*, Mathilde," said this small woman. "We can pay for our entertainment, and we are not highwaymen."

"Oh, very well, Lady Honor," said the other. "I only thought of your purse."

"It is much in your mind, I know," said the little woman ; and she addressed herself to the bewildered bookseller.

"Now will it inconvenience you, my dear man, if we take shelter here until it is time for us to go?"

"No, ma'am," said Stephen, looking, however, altogether lost. "Come in, if you please. Chairs, Michael. Your servant, sir."

He bustled to play the host—an odd performance between masterdom and deference. Somehow the whole gathering—including Mr. Latimer, who had followed on the heels of the visitors—managed to bestow itself in the little room ; and then Joshua



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closed the breach, swinging round into the doorway like an amazing figure in a weather-box.

There were four chairs in all. The ladies occupied two of these ; a third was taken by the younger of the men—an impassive young gentleman with a stare, very black eyebrows, and as dark a moustache, that might have been only a smear on his lip but for the little spits into which its ends were sharpened.

Lady Honor Gatwick, who all told—title and authority—was the smallest person in the room, settled the disposition in her quick, shrill voice, and, summoning Joan to come and sit by her, took the girl's hand delicately into her doll's palm, and addressed the bookseller.

"We are so much already," said she, "in your daughter's, and—and" (she made a little scoop with her head towards the clergymen. "Mr. Latimer," said Stephen, conscious of a certain reluctance in pronouncing the name)—"and in Mr. Latimer's debt, that to ask you to entertain us further seems an impertinence."

"Joan, ma'am," said Stephen, hearty at once, "can afford to give credit where the treasures of the old church——"

He broke off, astonished, for the little woman was beckoning to him. When at last he crossed over to her, she took him by his coat, and motioning to him

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to lean down, whispered, with an affectation of secrecy, in his ear, "Are they engaged?"

Stephen started, recovered himself, comprehended, and whispered back, scared and hoarse: "Lord bless me, no, ma'am!"

She nodded many times, and dismissing him with a smile, turned to Joan, who had shrunk back a little.

"Your father—" she began.

"He is not my father, my lady."

"Not your father?"

Stephen struck in—

"Adopted, ma'am. Taken by these hands, and the grace of God, from the sea—from an unknown wreck—when she was a baby child; and grown up in this house to womanhood."

Lady Honor threw up her little hands.

"From the sea!" she cried. "Think, Mathilde!"

"I do," said the magnificent lady. "Didn't you get very wet, girl?"

"I was rather young to know," said Joan.

Lady Honor looked at Stephen in a lost manner.

"But," she said, "my good man, did you consider the responsibility? She may be Perdita—and you accepted her without inquiry?"

"The brig was never identified," said Stephen, aghast.



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"And you didn't advertise?"

Stephen glanced at Joan piteously, and shook his head.

"Well!" cried the little lady; and she turned again upon her companion.

"You are the child of Leontes and Hermione," she said. "Don't contradict me, for I know it. I thought I recognised something odd about you—something *inexprimable*—when you talked to us in the old church. That was why I insisted upon returning after lunch; wasn't it, Kempton?"

"Mother, it's as good as a fairy story," said the languid young gentleman.

"She's Perdita," cried Lady Honor, "*une bonne trouvaille*—and without a Florizel, too. You needn't ogle her, you young dog. She's not thinking of you for the part."

Joan, whose cheeks had been glowing and dusking alternately, rose in great distress.

"Oh!" she cried, "please don't talk like that. I'm nobody at all; and if—if" (she looked about her desperately for some loophole of escape)—"if there's any one here worthy of notice, it's Mr. Latimer, who won a Royal Humane Society's medal for saving a boy from drowning."

Lady Honor, putting a detaining hand on her, nodded across to the young clergyman, who was

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standing to one side, a picture of conscious and unhappy self-restraint.

"Indeed," said she. "Positively we have struck the 'Land of Lost Gods.'" ("Nay, your leddyship, 'tis the Land of Green Ginger," put in Michael unheeded.) "And it was quite by chance, too, on our way home from the Island, and with some hours to spare on our hands."

She gently coaxed the girl to reseal herself.

"Two heroes," said she; "and the first wins my Perdita, and the second a medal. I wonder if they have a grievance against one another. No, don't move. I must have you all at Gatwick—I must indeed. You shall be packed up in cotton-wool and sent to me. Kempton, go and entreat Mr. Latimer to pay us a visit and to bring his prize medal with him. You will humour an old woman, sir, who hasn't much to entertain her in this world of artificities. Here, to be sure, is a romance—a sweet natural pastoral in its first act. You must leave the second to me, you pretty Perdita. It shall be a happy one, because I dote on happy things and happy people. I love to collect 'em about me. Don't I, Mathilde?"

"I beg your pardon. I didn't hear. Are you speaking of old china?"

"*Point du tout*. I am tired of old china—of old

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painted shepherdesses, Mathilde. My heart at last turns to Nature, as the only good."

"Won't your ladyship look round before deciding? Mr.—I didn't catch his name—deals in all sorts of fancy wares, you know."

"Why, I have decided already, my dear. You mustn't be jealous of this lady, little Perdita, when you meet her at Gatwick. She is my very old friend, and she came to me because I was so associated with the idea of happiness. Her name is Miss Matilda Brown, but we call her Mademoiselle Mathilde le Brun, because she was in *the* profession, you know. She used to sing divinely. At one time she was *l'entretien de toute la ville*. Do you know what that means? Of course not; and to be sure I hope you never will. She had a reputation, I can tell you, until she lost it—I mean, of course, her voice. It is sad to lose one's voice, is it not, when it is one's only possession?"

Joan was staring with wide eyes at the whilom cantatrice.

"Oh, madam!" she said breathlessly. "Were you really on the stage?"

So much she had gathered from the little lady's rapid utterance. Her artlessness had no ears to distinguish through the babble a still small clash of stilettos. Now Mademoiselle le Brun's cuirass showed

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no dint ; but there was a gasping motion about her mouth such as one sees in a winded bird. She made no reply ; but only lifted her eyebrows, as if to some amazing impertinence ; slightly shrugged her shoulders, and turned to speak to the man—the fourth of the party—who stood behind her chair.

“You will not get her to answer,” said Lady Honor ; “and it isn’t kind to remind one of one’s misfortunes, you unsophisticated Perdita. *Cela n’ira pas*. Now listen, and I will whisper. She was after all more a woman than an actress, because she did not hold the mirror up to Nature, but to herself. That, perhaps, was why she was a failure. Still, what harm could you mean ? and does my princess sing, or what are *her* accomplishments ?”

“Indeed, I haven’t any,” Joan was beginning, quite shocked and bewildered ; when Michael, who had edged his way round to the doorway, where Joshua stood, nudged that oracle in the ribs. It spoke at once—

“Joan, I’ll grant ye,” said he, “can lay on the colour a’most as well as Michael here can spread the ink.”

“Ah !” said Stephen, inspired — “your pictures, Joan. Perhaps the gentry would like——”

“We should,” broke in Lady Honor. “Fetch ’em by all means—fetch ’em at once, my dear man.”



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Joan put in a panic-stricken protest. It was laughed aside ; and Stephen disappeared to get the portfolio.

"Joan !" muttered Michael ; "it's all Joan !"

Joshua rumbled. It was his way of expressing sympathy.

Now the little ferment caused by this interruption subdivided the odd party. Joan was held—listening in a sort of trance, half trouble, half pleasure—to her part of protégée ; Mr. Kempton Gatwick languidly disengaged himself from his chair, and languidly crossed to where Gerard stood by the wall ; Made-moiselle le Brun turned completely round, so as to take her attendant cavalier into her confidence.

This gentleman (by name Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie), though hitherto unnoticed (as he would have wished to be), was quite intimately connected with the interests of each one of his party. In appearance he might have stood for something between a groom and a Roman Catholic priest—all very staid and dapper. He had thin hair smearing his forehead like rust, a thin bony face, and a long chin that he was in the habit of caressing with his head cocked critically to the potentialities of existence. He was, in fact, Lady Honor's Master of the Revels, or her steward, or her agent. He was Mr. Kempton's very obliging friend, too. His service to both was really name-

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less, or unnameable. He was a connoisseur in bric-à-brac, and in the arts that symbolise happiness. He collected for his patrons assiduously. His motto was, like the Frenchman's, "What plans shall we make for to-morrow?"—his business, to please. On this he staked his character. As with a true gambler, his next pleasure to winning was in losing.

Mademoiselle le Brun turned upon him.

"What is this change in the weather?" said she.

He grinned.

"Do you feel out in the cold?"

"I feel hot—hot," she muttered. "But yes, it is true, I shiver."

"I would recommend you to be careful," said he. "We live in a variable climate. Nothing is gained by scorning to take the ordinary precautions."

"Have I not done so, then?"

He shrugged his shoulders. The act seemed to wrinkle up his eyes. It was an affectation of his to appear short-sighted.

"Taking it in the abstract," he said, "one should never presume upon appearances."

"Presume!" she said, in a low fierce whisper.

"Why, yes," he answered. "There is such a thing (is there not?—I wouldn't venture to say for certain) as self-confidence become insolence?"

"Insolence! Oh, that is excellent! I have suffered

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enough to-day—myself—yes; and of insult, too—to—what is the meaning of this new idiotcy about Nature?"

"It was in the forecast, Matilda Brown."

"Ah, indeed?"

"We were predisposed to the change. We only awaited our opportunity. It has come most pat—that I do say. Here, without doubt, is the very child of Nature."

"Ah!—and who is her father?"

"Really, Matilda, you shock me—you do indeed. We don't look to Nature for a pedigree."

"Oh! I beg your pardon. I thought that, as a virtuoso, you always demanded a certificate of genuineness."

"Of Nature? Fie!"

"No, of a woman."

And in the meantime Stephen had come back with the portfolio of Joan's sketches, which he proudly submitted to his singular little visitor; and Mr. Gatwick was taking his reverence into *his* confidence.

"Happy to know more of you, sir."

"You are very good. I'm afraid I'm very much engaged."

"Eh?—Oh! I suppose you mean the mother's invite. Don't worry about that. It's her own enter-

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tainment she's after ; and, that being the case, she'll probably forget all about you in the next half-hour."

"Crowdie," cried Lady Honor from the table :  
"come here ! Mathilde !—*Isn't* that wonderful ?"

The two obeyed the summons.

"How very daring !" said Mademoiselle le Brun.  
"What an impossible effect !"

"Pos-i-tive-ly creative !" cried the connoisseur, holding a sketch at arm's length, and throwing back his head, in proof of how he was struck by it.

"Isn't it ?" said mademoiselle. "Nothing like it in Nature."

Stephen folded his hands and eased himself of a sigh of gratification.

"There, Joan !" he said. "There's testimony to your pretty imagination, my bird."

"Do *you* paint ?" asked Kempton of the clergyman.

"No, I don't," said Gerard brusquely.

He would have fain accepted the situation with good-humoured serenity. Somehow he found that impossible. He was agitated—restless to a degree. He had shared the part, as he often did now, of cicerone to these sightseers. He loved to do so. He would have laughed to scorn the idea that it implied



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any cheapening of his cloth. Now, even, he did not consciously resent the characteristic appropriation to themselves of the occasion by some fashionable time-killers. He only longed for them to be gone, that he might rescue Joan from a disturbing episode. It distressed him to see how Stephen—the blind old fool—helped, by his fondness, to encourage the spirit of vanity that, his heart could not but acknowledge, was the girl's weakness. He wanted to claim her for his own again—for his sole love—for their common passions and interests, and, alas! for the sake of that unsound emotionalism which it had been far better for him to master and forget. He had not conceived that love is not best wooed with tears and righteousness—that it loves a stolen kiss better than a moral.

The young gentleman laughed.

"I suppose not," said he. "But you *draw*, don't you, as a popular parson?"

"I am honoured in your good opinion," said Gerard.

"It's the young lady's, my dear sir. She referred to your abilities once or twice, if you recollect."

"Oh! did she?"

"Didn't she? I should remember, if I were in your place. It's an enviable one, you may take my word for it."

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"Very well. But I won't deprive you of it. It's a thing of such value."

"I ought to keep it, you mean. So I do, as a rule. I say—you seem an entertaining chap—calculated to shine in the world, you know. I suppose you were at Oxford. What brought you to this unconscionable hole?"

He seemed perfectly boyish—frank, and malicious, and insolent.

"If it comes to that," said Gerard, "what brought you?"

"My mother," said the young man promptly. "She's on a new tack. She's in a state of Nature, you know. Don't she look it? It's her newest craze. She's been dragging me about the country like anything, since it came on. But I rather like it. I'm in a state of nature, too."

He laughed again.

"Jerusalem! what eyes!" said he. "I'd have helped her with those sketches if I'd been you."

Lady Honor broke upon them from her place.

"Now, Kempton, you really *must* look at this. Isn't it sweet?"

"Very, mother. What is it? a barley-sugar temple?"

"Oh, Mr. Gatwick!" cried mademoiselle, "how abominable of you! Why, it's a waterfall."

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Joan began to sweep together her wares.

"There!" she said. "I'm sure you must all have seen enough."

"Oh, what a pity!" exclaimed the cantatrice. "I hadn't half done admiring them. They're like nothing I ever saw."

"Listen to that, Joan," said Stephen, delighted.

"Now, Crowdie," said Lady Honor—"where's the creature?—Crowdie, we must have the professional opinion before we bid. Eh?"

The agent bowed, smirked, and came to the front.

"Positively," said he, crinkling his lids, "positively, Lady Honor, they are revelations." (He took his chin into his confidence). "The perspective, perhaps, seems a lee-tle—eh? just a wee bit absolutely wrong. Now, Mr. Brotherhood, you should let her have lessons."

"Pooh!" cried the little visitor; "I won't have my Perdita spoiled of her artlessness. Nature is enough for you and for me—isn't she, Perdita?—and *she's* never in perspective."

"Joan, sir," said Stephen gravely, "is in the way to give rather than to take lessons. These pictures are her holiday tasks, as I may say. She's a more serious art to commend her, ma'am."

"Eh? she has? What is it?"

"Speech—speech, if you understand."

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"Why, we all have that."

"Not the *art*, ma'am, I'll venture. She's trained herself to that perfection, that——"

"Daddy, don't!" murmured the girl.

"Now," cried Lady Honor, "what does the good creature mean? that you recite—declaim?"

"And so does Michael," said Joshua, from the door.

"That is really delightful," cried her ladyship. "What a politic little miss, to be sure, to keep her trump to the last. O Perdita, Perdita! Now, darling, to please me."

"No, no," said Joan, genuinely upset. "Please don't ask me. I'd rather not."

"Joan!" cried Stephen, in grieved expostulation.

"Daddy," said the girl, with something a look of obstinacy, "if you want to show off the family gifts, here's uncle Michael ready and willing."

"Ah!" said the visitor; "of course, to be sure. You must remember you're only the good old shepherd, my friend, and mustn't any longer claim my Perdita, now she's emancipated, for one of yourselves."

Joan started as if she had been struck. Her eyes met her foster-father's across the room. Stephen returned her look so gently; then faced round to Michael, who stood behind.



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LADY HONOR. "A capital beginning. There's something in it I seem to have heard before."

STEPHEN. "There, Michael! There's praise!"

MICHAEL. "Did your leddyship note the little ingenious play on *strikes*? Now, the poor creatur' continues—

'I will let down my tresses——'

MR. CROWDIE. "She'd have to stand on her head to do it, you know."

MICHAEL. "Eh?"

MR. C. "Why, they were up on end, weren't they?"

MICHAEL (*civilly*). "You'll excuse me, mister. You're a'rubbing of it into your chin."

MR. C. "What?"

MICHAEL. "A gob of blue paint you've lifted with your thumb off one of Joan's picturs."

[*The company breaks out laughing.*]

MICHAEL (*securing silence by sheer force of dignity*).

"'I will let down my tresses for a cloak.'"

MISS BROWN (*aside*). "A hair shirt."

MR. C. (*aside*). "Because of the intrigue, eh?"

MISS B. "Tee-hee!—You really have rubbed it into your chin, you know."

MR. C. "I can't remember which picture it was left such an impression on me."

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MISS B. "The barley-sugar temple, of course. It was so sticky."

MICHAEL (*in the meantime*).

"*The 'ead speaks from the pot—*

"' Be'old !'

*The lady speaks—*

"' Oh, my prophetic soul ! my 'Enery !'

*The 'ead speaks—*

"' Listen, and I will a tale unfold

Shall sting you into madness where you stand.'"

MR. C. (*aside*). "Oh, what a scorpion !"

[*Lady Honor and Joan whisper earnestly together.*

MICHAEL.

*The lady speaks—*

"' That voice, enamoured of the midnight hair !'"

MR. C. (*aside*). "It stood up to some purpose, you see."

MICHAEL.

"Tis his—my love's ! I could not be mistook.

I'm not afeared. Sweet buried voice, speak on.

Like thee, my fool, there never was another ;

And always such a gentleman to me,

Despite the way in which I sauced your garb.

E'en now I see thee, hear thee, as when first

You mutely gazed. Oh, what a fool you were !"

LADY H. "Bravo !"

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MICHAEL.

“ ‘ And when o’er this intrigue you lost your ’ead,  
Oh, what a fallin’-off was there from that  
Godlike perfection that doth make a man.’ ”

“Crowdie !” called young Gatwick across the room.  
The agent hurried to the summons.

“Yes, Mr. Kempton ?”

“Let me introduce you to Mr. Latimer. You’ll—  
ah !—you’ll find him most entertaining.”

He yawned and lounged away, rather rudely pushing past the stupefied playwright.

“Mother,” said he, “are you keeping an eye on the time ?”

“Yes, to be sure. Sit down here and talk to Perdita, you ill-mannered Florizel.”

“ ‘ That doth make a man,’ ”

said Michael.

Mr. Stillbody uttered a second surprising exclamation. It was by no means such a success as his first.

“I beg your pardon,” said Crowdie.

“I didn’t speak, sir,” said Gerard.

“Ah ! I see where you’re engaged. England don’t produce many such young men as that, Mr. Latimer.”

“Indeed ? In what way do you mean ?”

“In what way ?”



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"Virtue, or arrogance, for example?"

"Oh, fie, sir, fie! Isn't it obvious? So rich, so handsome, such a cultivated man of the world."

"I see—of the world. England's only a small corner of that, and this place, of England. There's a suggestion of disproportion here. Perhaps we could focus this giant better if he went away—a good long distance, let us say."

"Pardon me, sir—aren't you a little churlish—now, aren't you, really? It's fortunate—I must say it—that we aren't dependent on your hospitality. And so innocently as he's amusing himself, with that particularly charming young—child of Nature, may I call her?"

Lady Honor suddenly called out "Silence!"

" 'That doth make a man,' "

said Michael.

"Oh, thank you," said Lady Honor. "An original piece, and most pathetic. Now, darling. Mathilde, we have been getting at our Perdita's real confidences and aspirations. We have prevailed upon her to recite a little piece."

Michael wheeled and retreated to the doorway.

"Joshua!" said he.

"Ay?"

"Damme!"

Joan rose. Her face was quite white. It was evi-



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dently only some emotion of pride that stung her to the ordeal. She shot one piteous glance at Gerard ; then sighed, and resolutely made her bid for honour.

"It's only a few lines," she said in a low voice—"about a poor homeless cripple who, one winter morning after a dreadful night of rain, was found dead in the village street."

And then she spoke her little piece very pathetically, warming to her subject the more as she felt it strike home.

"The night is dark, the wet winds sweep,  
On shuttered panes the tempests drum,  
The stormy roads are flogged with rain.  
Push on, brave heart ! And not in vain—  
For rest shall come :  
' He giveth His beloved sleep !'

"Nay, never pause to breathe and weep !  
No home is thine or housing here.  
To that small plat of soil and weed  
Thou askest for thine utmost need  
Push on ! for there  
' He giveth His beloved sleep !'

"Draw down his weary eyelids, keep  
The daylight from his meek repose.  
Death hath given him a sweet face  
To whom Life never showed a grace,  
For now he knows  
' He giveth His beloved sleep.'"

At the conclusion Lady Honor rose.

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"My dear," said she, "you have moved my old heart, I declare, as I never thought anything could move it again—no, not even the marriage or death of a member of the royal family. Positively I must kiss you—" and she did.

Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie made a show of putting his hand to his eyes, but remembered the blue paint on his thumb and kissed two of his fingers instead.

"You are honoured, Miss Brotherhood," he said, "but, I venture to say, not above your deserts. Actually, a tragedy queen—actually, now. Quite out of your sphere in this remote Thule."

Joan murmured, "You are all very good."

Stephen, lingering, with moist eyes, on this music of praise, must go out into the shop, whither he was summoned.

"You *shall* come to Gatwick," said Lady Honor. "I am in earnest, and I am a wilful woman, and I am bent upon making people happy. That dear little miserable poem, now—I must not keep it to myself. Who wrote it? I insist on knowing."

Joan looked across the room, drooped her lids, hesitated.

"Mr. Latimer," she said, in a low voice.

"Mr. —? Oh, to be sure. *Il n'est pas si diable qu'il est noir*. I must have Mr. Latimer too. I shall

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rub my lamp and transport you all to Gatwick. What do you say, sir ?”

“That I have duties, that” (he returned Joan’s look steadily, searchingly) “if you will let us leave it an open——”

“Us !” cried the little lady sharply. “But is not my Perdita independent of——”

She broke off. There was a sound, a sort of cry, at the door of the room. Stephen stood there, with white face and staring eyes. He held away from him a paper, that fluttered in his hand.

“Daddy !” cried the girl, “daddy ! what is it ?”

In presence of the agitation that was so moving him, she forgot all her pride, all her shame, and the circumstance that hedged them. She hurried to his side.

“Daddy !” she cried again.

The dazzle in his eyes softened to a light of most human love. He held out the letter ; he put his left arm about the shoulders of his waif.

“Joan !” he said, “listen—My God ! listen to this : *‘We have to inform you that under the will of the late Sir John Swayne, you become entitled to a legacy of——’*”

Something clicked in his throat. He gulped desperately once or twice ; then suddenly crumpled the paper, crushed it into his breast, and let his hands



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meet about her neck. The tears were running down his cheeks.

"It's come," he said, "it's come, my bird. Our dreams, Joan—why, you shall be a lady yet, and have your heart's desire."

"Daddy, daddy," she murmured—"before all these people!"

He tightened his hold.

"Before the world, Joan. And—and—Joan, I've loved you as my own bairn. You'll let me come with you. It shall be all yours—every penny of it."

## PART II

### CHAPTER I

IN the matter of conduct any day is All-fools Day at a big London terminus; as a matter of fact it was the first of April, and the scene was Waterloo station.

A rather aged-looking man and a girl alighted from a hansom. A porter shouldered their portmanteaux—brand new and of sleekest cowhide—and waited expectant. The old man paid the driver—scurvily, as it appeared.

"It's your fare," said the old man—"isn't it?"

Jehu gathered up his reins; prepared his retreat.

"Ah!" he said: "*you've* been accustomed to travel in the Queen's kerridge, *I* can see."

He jerked on the bit. The cab drew away.

"Give the old 'ooman a extry bloater for supper, with my love," he called over his shoulder.

He swung his whip, turned round in his seat, arrogant in the craven absence of retort.

"You may call it 'aving your 'art in your boots,"

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he shouted : "but, if you ast me, I should say it was bunions"—and with that he receded.

The two passengers followed the porter into the station.

"I wish you wouldn't invite such scenes," said the girl.

"I paid the man his fare, Joan—every penny of it, including the bags."

"They always expect more than their fare. Everybody says so. And what is a shilling more or less to people in our position?"

"It's not right," he answered doggedly—"it's not right, my dear. It's the people that can afford it that set the clock for those that can't. Besides——"

He checked himself, muttered again, "It's not right," and stopped to see their luggage labelled.

It was to Stephen's advantage that his scholarly sobriety of tone, both in speech and dress, must prevail through any change of fortune; that it was as unnatural for him to commit social as bookish solecisms. Now, in his broadcloth and soft felt hat, in his large well-polished boots (lumpy enough, it must be confessed, to justify a late satire), and with a grey shawl crossed over his chest, he looked as like a retired schoolman as anything. There was something else, it is true—something in his expression—significant of the change in his condition, that a

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familiar intelligence might have observed yet failed to construe. It might have meant merely the foreclosing of age on a mortgaged simplicity; it might have meant the coagulating in his veins of the milk of human kindness. He had eaten of his windfall for a month now—a month passed by him and his bairn in London. It must have proved an acrid fruit, so to warp his nature in that little time.

"Where for?" said the porter. There was that quality in his tone that suggested he had taken the measure of his prospective tip, and was prepared, so far as he might venture, to endorse the cabby's insolence.

"Bishopshead," said Stephen.

"Three-futtyfive," said the man. "You've 'alf-an-hour to wait."

He shuffled off for his labels, and returned in leisurely fashion, stopping to speak to an acquaintance by the way. He was as deliberate over his task as if he were hired by time to mend bags with strips of paper. Having completed it, he held out his hand. Stephen obliged him with twopence.

"Fourpence, if *you* please," said the man.

"What do you mean?"

"It's my due, sir. Twopence on each port-mantel."



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"Nonsense! I——"

"Pay it him," said the girl. "For goodness' sake don't make another scene!"

"But, Joan, darling——"

"Pay it him."

Stephen fumbled for the balance, and dealt it out reluctant.

"It's extortion," he said. "You shouldn't encourage 'em to practise on my credulity. I don't believe for a moment——"

She hurried him away to the booking-office.

"Which class, dear?" he whispered.

She turned from him, with a little angry shift of her shoulders. There were many people at hand, common dowdy folk, patiently awaiting their turn at the ticket-place. She was as a queen to these—in her dress, in her manner, in her beauty. Not one of them but would have felt it sacrilege to so much as brush against the silver-fox boa that took her little luxurious chin with comfort. Not one of them, being woman, but would have lost—her train, to stand an hour in those pretty shoes, and for an hour have the pretty hat—black velvet and black plumes—and the pretty face and golden hair under it for her own. She would have accepted the temporary gift as contingent on her travelling third class the rest of her days, and would have laughed at the one-sidedness of the bargain. Not

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so Joan, who considered no personal advantages of her own but as earnest of a romantic origin and a triumphant future. It was her sense of duty to these problems that precluded the idea of an utterly need-less economy.

Stephen pursued and weakly persisted.

"I only thought maybe you'd prefer—The cheaper air's the cleaner, you know, Joan."

"*Do* get the tickets," she said. "I can't think what's come to you."

He murmured, but obeyed; and they walked out on to the platform together—into the very thick of All-fools Fair.

The effect here was as of a motley squad of panto-mime supers, awaiting their "call" and trying, like old stagers, to affect nonchalance in the midst of distraction. Some, running in flushed and late, would seem to be making anxious explanation of their unpunctuality to unresponsive and irresponsible officials. Others gathered about the spots where little isolated rehearsals, as it were, were in progress. Here, for instance, was a scene enacting round the station letter-box. Some one had posted his ticket into it, and was vociferous to have it recovered. An inebriated citizen came along—a solemn and silent man, with reserves of thought. He took in the situa-tion presently, then lurched forward and posted a

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penny. "Now," said he, "pull out the bloomid draw!" and away he tacked, with much internal chuckling over his own astuteness in resolving simple problems.

"By your leave!" growled a porter, like a clown, and ploughed a furrow through the human press with a luggage trolley.

Elsewhere a sharp-featured lady in spectacles, who made it a principle to ask no questions where common sense could supply the answer, had mounted, with an air of superior understanding, into an empty carriage, and was presently borne away to a siding.

It was All-fools Day; and here, to be sure, if only for the solemnity of his visage, was Tom Fool himself.

"Mr. Latimer!"

"Mr.—eh!" said Stephen. He had been peering amongst the papers at the stall, and now faced round suddenly.

"Why, sir," said he: "you're never going to Gatwick for Easter, too?"

The young man gazed steadily at the ex-bookseller. He was something of a changed young man, one could have thought, in these four or five weeks—a little haggard and haunted-looking, a little hectic and starved in appearance.

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"Why not?" he said quietly.

Stephen, indeed, had no reason to give. But the thought was unpalatable to him. So much was expressed in his altered face.

"Lady Honor," said Gerard, "included me, if you remember, in the invitation. She did me the favour to renew it, recently, in London."

"Ay," said Stephen coolly. "And how about St. Mark's wanting its pastor this long time?"

"I am not attached to St. Mark's."

"Aren't you, sir? And perhaps that's to say your attachment was apart from your duties to it."

"Daddy!" whispered Joan; but the man was in one of his rare dogged moods.

"An invitation!" he exclaimed. "Why, I heard it, Mr. Latimer; and I read it (for all I'm little versed in the ways of society) for a civility forced upon her by your dogging our footsteps; and not intended to be accepted."

Joan turned upon him. Her lips trembled; her eyes were like flints.

"How dare you!" she said: "how dare you!—Mr. Latimer" (she came about again), "take me for a little walk, please; I want to speak to you."

"No!" said Stephen.

"I say yes, sir."

She swept away queenlily. The young priest

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moved by her side. She would take him only far enough to flout authority. Authority scowled at a distance, regarding them.

"Gerard," said Gerard's wife very softly, "is this wise?"

"Joan," he answered: "you wouldn't punish your dog for wanting to follow you?"

"No, Gerard. I would save him the pain his following me might bring upon him."

He looked at her most desolately.

"How long is this to be? I can't live without seeing you!"

"Till I have won my name—won it off my own bat, Gerard, as you men say. I have none to bring you yet. O Gerard, if you would only believe me. Your sad face haunting me in London—in the parks, at the theatres! I went there to study—to learn; and how could I learn with that sadness oppressing me? I longed always to be saying, 'Trust me, and go back to your work.' We *can't* confess yet—we can't indeed. My prospects would be shattered at a blow. A little while, dear; and daddy will procure me the opportunity I have so pined for. You don't know how I have urged him already; but 'Wait, wait,' he says, 'till the freshness of this holiday is staled.' And, indeed, we have so much to see and hear. Gerard, try to think it would be best for you

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to go back—only for a little while. When I have triumphed——”

“Ah, Joan! would you be the more willing then to tell the truth, when you had won your renown on a lie?”

“A lie, sir? You forget there is no proof but our word. Why, even now it is a dream to me sometimes, that——”

“Joan!”

“You shouldn’t drive me to it. There, I didn’t mean to be cruel; but you think only of yourself.”

“Of myself! God help me—after all I have sacrificed!”

“What have you sacrificed?”

“Why, look at me! Is this the priest, the apostle—the pure of heart and set of purpose—this renegade to the schism he denounced—this poor invertebrate creature raging and starving for the food he is too craven to seize! He has only sacrificed his friend, his mission, his honour before heaven; his——”

He broke off in great agitation; then added, in a very emotion of entreaty: “Not his faith, Joan! For God’s sake, leave him that!”

“I am sorry,” she said quite coldly. “I thought the greater sacrifice had been mine. I, who might have looked—but it’s no use saying more. I have been wrong, it seems, from the first.”

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He drooped his head.

"Pity me," he moaned—"pity me!"

"I do indeed. So lost in jealousy, and distrust, and selfishness."

Her words stung him to a rally of manliness. He looked up, and his eyes were bright with fury.

"What pain is it you dread for me if I come? That I should be further witness to the insolent attentions of that young cub and fop who has already, here in London, condescended to appropriate you to his set?"

She turned her back upon him, and without another word walked away.

He gasped—took a single step as if to follow her—checked himself. The sudden realisation of a certain curiosity he was exciting in casual passers-by brought him within grasp of his senses. The vulgar tragedies of the police-courts—such had their proper incidence in a railway station—not the unclassified tragedies of polite breeding. He affected an air of unconcern, and, putting immense restraint upon himself, strolled away to a darker and remoter part of the platform. Here he paused, and leaning against a pillar, yielded himself to the rack of his thoughts.

Was he sorry that the cry wrung from that long accumulating pain of his had escaped him at last?

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Would she even think the worse of him for uttering it? No, and no. For the first, it had found justification in her refusal to reply to it—in that assumption of offence that is so easily the resource of the conscience-stricken; for the second, it had declared his self-emancipation, however late, from an abject servitude. It had shown her that there was yet that in him which could revolt against an imposition most intolerable to his moral no less than to his intellectual independence; that, if a meek and self-obliterating priest, he could be dangerous as a man. Like the jennet in the fable, she had chosen him for her own purposes to ride her, and should find she had saddled herself with a master instead of a temporary champion of her mood. What a fire-and-leek-eating Pistol, to be sure!

So far his wave of passion carried him; and he thought he had found his feet, poor donkey. And, behold! it needed only the back-wash to drag him into the surf again.

There had been the suggestion of innuendo in his cry—an implication of her, at least tacit, subscription to a situation that was false and wrong. But was he justified in making it? If not—God help him! would she ever forgive him? And if she did not?

One desperate rally more! Should he, taking the hardier if not the nobler side of faith, return to his



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work, and thence, from an assured standpoint, write to her : "If, when this madness is past, you seek me out, I shall understand, of that act alone, that there is no need for me to ask one question, but only to say : 'I was here, waiting for you, strong in my trust, upborne by my duty.' But if you do not come, I shall know you dread the question I would never put ; that it is better so—better our unspoken divorce should be made absolute than that I, the teacher of the Word, should consent by silence to a lie. The sins of default——"

His thoughts reeled to that first evening—to the deep, steady eyes, shining like pebbles under a stream, that had seemed to focus his text, appropriating it to a single direction. Now the very memory of the eyes absorbed him again. The real sin of default would be in a careless trusteeship of these jewels—these divining crystals—that had been committed to his keeping. He lost himself in a moment in mere sensuous dreaming—in the rapture of secret possession of that which others could not be human and not covet. On that score, to be consistent he must not take exception to human nature. It would be ridiculous, even, to be jealous.

Well—was he jealous? He had the knowledge of possession ; he had the girl's own talisman in his bosom. Jealousy, we know, makes the meat it feeds on. Gerard, at least, from his gaunt and

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dyspeptic appearance, might have dieted long on such garbage.

No ; he could not play his duty against his passion. To possess what others coveted ?—yes ; but, like the poet in the ballad, he must be there to see. If he were not, he might lack the food that his morbid appetite craved. But already he desired to exclude young Gatwick from his processes of rapture.

He could not go. That one heroism of passive confidence was impossible to his ardent temperament. As easy to practise philosophy in an oubliette.

He broke from his reverie, with a self-conscious sigh of relief—a sigh as from one who had offered himself to renunciation and been rejected. Joan had, after all, only wished to consult his ease of mind. He would prove to her how unnecessary was her concern for him, how little she need fear from his rashness in following her.

A bell jangled in the distance. He must hurry if he would catch the train. He hesitated. It would be no impolitic thing to let her suppose for a time that he had had the strength to cut himself adrift from her. He would go to Bishopshead by a later train. A dozen times he advanced a step or two—checked himself—went back—returned. At the end, he saw the three-forty-five puffing out of the station. Then he went hurriedly up the platform, and con-

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sulted a porter. There was another train in an hour. An hour ! God in heaven, it was an eternity to one in his condition ! He set to tramping to and fro like a very castaway measuring time against the dawn.

It was in the course of his interminable sentry-go that, happening to glance towards the window of a waiting-room, he was struck motionless by a vision that met his eyes. A face, as solemn and speculative as an ape's, was pressed against the glass within, watching him. The next moment he had pushed open the door of the room, and was accosting, in a sharp quick undertone, no less a personage than Michael Brotherhood.

"What has brought you here ?"

"Twelve-seventeed," said Michael briefly. His eyes were a little glazed. He exhibited a tendency to sway at the waist, notwithstanding he had thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets, like splints, to keep himself stiff.

"Did Stephen invite you ? Did he know you were coming ?"

Michael produced a hand and waved it. The effect was so nearly disastrous, that he had to hastily fasten himself together again.

"I cub to London, Mr. Latimer, sir, on root to the princely 'ouse of Gatwick—hic."

"*You ?*"

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"Meeser."

"Who asked you?"

"My brother, Sir Stephen, sir, wrote me—together with a fi-pun note—that he was goid to Gatwick, sir, on the afternoon of this first of April—he and the lady Joad my niece, sir, to exhibit—eh?—to exhibit the fally talents, sir. I" (he forgot himself, flourished out his hands, and sat down hard on a seat, on which he elected to remain, with his hat fallen over one eye)—"I, sir, exhibiti'—eh?—in myself, sir, the first expresshel of the fally talents."

"You must go back, do you hear? This isn't the station for Gatwick."

Michael assumed a look of fatuous consternation.

"Ain't it?" said he. "Only think! What is, now?"

"Never mind. Your station's Frimlington."

"Sir," said Michael, with elaborate dignity, "I've had a sufficiency of your conversation."

"I daresay. And what do you intend to do?"

"I shall carry out my origidal desigd, sir, of washing from this here widdow till I see my brother Sir Stephen pass."

"He's gone already."

Michael, safely established, could venture a gesture symbolic of disdainful incredulity.

"It's the truth," said Gerard. "I was to—to have

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travelled with them, but missed the train. I saw them go without me."

It was evident that Michael, for all his assurance, was dumbfounded.

"I dider fall asleep—no, not for five minutes," he muttered, dismayed. Then he glanced up again, his little eyes blinking with craft.

"Are you goid still, Mr. Lat'mer?"

"Yes, by-and-by—that is—Now, my dear Mr. Brotherhood, listen to me. You can't go to Gatwick. You haven't been invited."

"The fally talent's been invited, sir. Joad can't ged alog without me. I've god the Jester in my pockid at this momerd, sir."

"You would give great offence to your brother. Miss Brotherhood herself would be completely upset by your appearing, without an invitation, in that great house. Now, do let me go and look you out a train back to Frimlington. I will take your ticket for you, and see you off myself."

Assuming consent of silence, he hurried out upon the platform, made his inquiries, and paid away money that he could ill afford to lose. But Joan must be spared this infliction at all costs. His part in averting it should, moreover, serve to restore concord between him and her. There was a fresh goad to his resolution.

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He was not long about his business ; but when he returned, Michael had vanished. He waited a little while, then started out to hunt the truant. He could find no trace of him anywhere. Time sped on ; his train was due to start. Completely baffled, he hung back as long as he dared ; then, hoping against hope that the compositor's sobering sense had prevailed with him, he took his seat. As the train was actually on the move, a little man scuttled up and flung himself into the guard's van.

"My fred," he gasped, "my fred's in the front there, and has got my ticket. I'll change at the next station."

Concealed behind a lean-to advertisement board, he had watched every movement of his pursuer.



## CHAPTER II

YOUR pietist is eternally moralising that the world is nothing more important than a post-house in the system of creation—dine, change horses, write a letter or two, perhaps—and on again into the dark. Or, better, it is a port to the mariner. He comes out of the blind seas and the welter. The foam that has thrashed, the flakes that have dazzled him, evolve of themselves some sentient design. They are not foam or flakes : they are gulls circling about him. Thicker and thicker they come wheeling, screaming ; and their voices in turn melt into the screech of the shingle. In the livid, lifeless wall of the fog-bank appear stains and splotches, like storm water soaked into a ceiling. These stains deepen, and, as if appropriating the mist to their own shape and substance, resolve themselves into phantom turrets and trees and spires. Blurred they are, like images out of focus ; but the mariner floats on, and—lo ! they are trees and houses, indeed, and the fog is the breath of a pleasant land. The harbour puts an arm about the

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ship ; softly the quay kisses it. Welcome, unknown mariner !

He sees the lights come out at dusk, he hears the fiddles squeak and sing. Discipline is relaxed ; he may go ashore, with his pockets stuffed with prize-money.

On the morrow or a week hence, he is gone. This garden, set in the middle wastes—it was a warm, rapturous spot. While he was in it, he held glorious holiday. His real business is with the outer darkness.

He is gone, perforce ; yet he would fain carry a dream with him, of ecstasy wrung, by whatever means, from opportunity—would fain leave a memory, of sorrow, if nothing better will serve. Perhaps his bequest is a stain of wine, or worse, on a deal-white floor ; perhaps it is a bundle of rushes cut from the river bank to weave into a cradle. He was given his “day-off,” and he made the most of it. Shall a grudging Providence complain ? All the prospect, all the retrospect, is a sobbing, whirling chaos.

“A port,” says your pietist—because he is by temperament a missionary ; and “Very well,” says your *impietist*—who by temperament is a rogue,—“I will take you at your word.” And so he sings and jigs, and broaches his reservoirs of hot blood, eagerly



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against his summons to be off again on the morrow into the spindrift and the waste.

Was Kempton Gatwick such a rogue? Alas! it is to be feared he lacked humanity for the part. Because he did not play the game square. Because he was the master-mariner himself, who would not go ashore, but made his mate his pander. For the rest, he was indifferent to all dreams and memories.

It is evil for a man to be master of himself, if himself is a slave to indulgence. Then indulgence is the master. Kempton was masterful by nature. The more, therefore, was he *slave* to himself. He had been petted all his life, by circumstance, by his parents. These had accomplished a *mariage de convenance*—as between a city magnate and the thinly endowed sister of a marquis. From the first the son had been accepted by his father as an astounding earnest of the unattainable confuted; by his mother as a material reproach to her husband for having presumed to marry into her family. That was an assurance that the elder Mr. Gatwick did not at least take advantage of a second time. Having once vindicated it, he hastened to relegate himself to a back shelf—in the family vault. Realising, too late, his own amazing effrontery, he died, it may be supposed, of a suffusion of blood to his cheeks, having first done all that was in his power to atone by

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making a very proper testimony of his fortune. In fact neither the heir nor the widow had reason for carping over its disposition. He—the husband and father on sufferance—had shown himself very sensible of his obligation relatively to each.

Gatwick, that stood a little aloof from the old ecclesiastical town of Bishopshead in Hampshire, was left the property of Lady Honor, but conditionally on Kempton's retaining a sort of vested right in it as Home. It was but a quick hour's journey from London by train—an inestimable advantage to a family that, dealing eternally in the article of happiness, must have nothing less than a metropolis to shop in. The house was an imposing one of many rooms; with only two of which, however, this history is to concern itself.

The first of these to be noticed was a very handsomely-proportioned snuggerly that opened, to the favoured few, upon the hall. It was Kempton's exclusive adytum, into which none unprivileged might penetrate. He called it indifferently his man-hole, or his oratory. Its fireplace was opposite the window, that looked upon the drive; and a screen, arbitrarily adorned with some of the least fastidious of the productions of the *Sketch* and other periodicals, served the double purpose of enclosing in an atmosphere of warmth, and of keeping private from the

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scrutiny of passers-by outside, any one who sat behind it. On the mantelpiece was a marble copy in miniature of the Venus de' Medici, whose pierced ears (with tiny diamond buttons in them) and gilded hair brought the little figure curiously out of the domain of pure into that of impure art. For the rest, the oratory contained, amongst other relics significant of the catholicity of a "devout lover," quite a number of offerings from the unfaithful—of an esoteric rather than an intrinsic value. Photographs, flowers, locks of hair, Love's IOU's scrawled on scented billets, signed sometimes with a row of crosses, sealed sometimes with a blot the size of a wafer—here was such a collection as youths of face and fortune like Kempton indulge themselves withal, instead of the stamps or bookplates that must satisfy their less gifted contemporaries.

Now, on this evening of the first of April, Kempton—withdrawing himself from the uproar of an early late-dinner, at which a dozen or so cousins and acquaintances had been present—was escaped into his manhole for an hour's peaceful self-communion, before the business of the night—a miscellaneous entertainment of frolic and dancing—should claim him.

He was in a peculiarly quiet mood. As he lounged before the fire, dreaming and smoking, his strong

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dark young face might have been sculptured from that of the genius of imperturbable serenity.

The door of the room was opened partially and softly, and somebody slipping in, closed it without a sound, came round noiselessly to the fire, and, seating himself before it, turned his bony hands to the warmth, and his face, in a series of covert glances, to the passive young figure.

Quite a long silence was maintained. The smoker seemed actually unaware of the presence within touch of him—even when he scrutinised it from under insolent lids. Then—

“Crowdie,” he said suddenly and tonelessly, as if taking up a lazy thread of disputation, “canker in a dog comes from high livin’, don’t it?”

“I believe so, Mr. Kempton.”

“It’s a sort of parasite, I suppose.”

“No doubt.”

“Do you think, if I took to livin’ cleanly and simply that you would drop from me?”

The agent shifted in his seat and sniggered.

“You’re pleasant, sir. Anyhow you don’t call yourself a dog, I hope?”

“No; a hound.”

“Tut—tut, Mr. Kempton! why should I fall from you in any case? You’ve always been a good friend to me. Ever since your sainted father

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did me the honour to superannuate me from his secret service, as I may say, you've been a friend to me."

"A friend? I never looked upon it in that light. But, I suppose——Crowdie, are you cold?"

"I've just come off a journey, sir. The wind's bitter."

"You're always cold, aren't you?"

"Always, Mr. Kempton. The frost is in my bones, I think."

"I'd keep it there, if I were you. You'll have need of it all some day."

"Tee-hee! Well, sir; and so the parson has turned up."

"Yes, he was at the feast—a skeleton, my word. You should have been there to hear cousin Mary chaffin' him."

"Ah! but I enjoyed my own business, too. Will you hear about it, sir?"

"Crowdie, you itch, shall I scratch you off? Crowdie, what is the understandin' between those two?"

"Meaning the parson and—and——"

"The maid, of course. Eh?"

"The maid, I am convinced, sir."

"Well?"

"There's none, I'll stake my word, sir."

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"That's a bank of elegance note, Crowdie. Stake somethin' you value."

"Very well. My reputation."

"Good luck! But—I don't know. It's your most useful possession, after all. So, you'll stake your reputation that there's nothin' between them?"

"Not at all. I think there's a great deal between them."

"What do you mean? I'm in no mood for foolin', I tell you."

"Why, sir, I mean this. The old legatee's between them. He's a stiffish bullfinch, isn't he? as we learnt in London. The reverend's own poverty is between them; the lady's very natural ambitions are between them—a pretty high jump altogether, upon my—h'm—honour. I don't say she mayn't possibly have been attracted by his—bilious, eh?—attentions in the past; but——"

"But what?"

"Well, sir—if I may say it—the Joan that dines off silver isn't likely to think with the Joan that keeled the pot. He's got the complaint—you can tell by his face; but I doubt if she's caught it."

Kempton threw the butt of his cigar into the fire and, leaning down with clasped hands, brooded upon the coals.

"I don't know," he said thoughtfully—"I don't

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know. She was too studiously bent on snubbin' him, to please me."

"Oh, really, sir," cried Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie, "you're much too nice! But, if you're afraid, why, make the running at once, now you've the advantage of being in your own country."

"Curse him!" muttered the young man—"curse him, anyway! What did he want bringin' his sick face here? I thought the fellow too much of a gentleman to take advantage of the mother's burlesque invite."

"Ah!" murmured the agent. "What he *wants* is another matter. And what Miss Brotherhood wants—if I may venture—is not to go back to lentils and spring water."

He constricted his lids and, rubbing his chin softly, looked stealthily at his preoccupied employer. Kempton sat up suddenly.

"Well," he said, "granted you're right, there's—*we've* got the bullfinch to get over, too."

Mr. Crowdie drew in his breath, emitted it again, like a juggler, in a little string of chuckles, and manipulated his palms, as if he were rolling nothing into something very surprising.

"*Will* you be pleased to hear the result of my visit to Somerset House, sir?" he said archly.

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"What is it? There's some devilish meanin' in you. Have you been robbin' an orphan, to make you look so benevolent?"

"Tee-hee! Very well, sir. Now, I'll tell you. I paid my shilling——"

"Then you must have been."

"—I paid my shilling, I say, and saw the will. Now at what figure, sir, would you engage to put the fortune left to this venerable old huckster, about whose sudden accession to wealth such a mystery has been made and such stories told?"

"Oh, damn your conundrums!"

Crowdie examined his finger-nails, whistled in his breath, and said shortly—

"Two thousand pound?"

A brief dead silence ensued.

"You must be wrong," said Kempton in a low voice.

"It's there, sir, in black and white, for any one to see. Only people prefer to draw upon imagination, that's a free lottery, to paying a shilling for the truth."

"But, their life in London, man?"

"Why, Mr. Kempton, to a gentleman of his antecedents the fortune seemed inexhaustible, no doubt. But, you'll please to acknowledge I was right in my surmises."



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"The 'Grand' — dresses — diamonds — theatres — Good God, and what else !"

"Exactly so, sir. And, as a result, I shouldn't be surprised—I really shouldn't be surprised, sir, if the old gentleman were near the end of his tether."

"Supposin' he is ?"

"Supposing he is ! Mr. Kempton !—you don't do credit to yourself, sir—you don't indeed. How do you think he'll be looking upon the prospect of breaking it to the lady ? of saying to her : 'Joan, lass, this theatre business is all a fudge, and exploded at that. Our holiday is at an end. We must go back to brother Michael and lobscouse.'"

"He don't seem, accordin' to you, to have any choice."

"No, sir. But he may have, according to you."

"Well—what ?—Go on."

The master of the revels leaned forward, and ventured to take his employer very intimately into his confidence—

"Do you realise, sir (what has been pretty plain to me for some time), that the legatee has set his hopes on you to get him out of the mess ? that he has been watching you, weighing you, holding the lady's hand out to you, in the fond belief that you meant to take it and slip a ring on its third finger ? Now, take my word for it, he is at his wits' end—

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he must be. He has nothing for it but to try and *force* your hand."

"Well—if he does?"

"You hold the cards, sir. If you play 'em with discretion, the result is as you wish it. This *début*, that is to take the town by storm—he'll want money for it—hush-money, shall we call it? He is playing you against the exposure that he dreads. Lend it him, sir; and you lend it to her. Don't you see?"

"I see,—that I'm to fish for a sprat with a meat-hook."

"Oh, very well, sir, if you think she'll come to a smaller bait——"

"I don't, of course. I've the honour of assuring you, Mr. Crowdie, that you're a very complete reptile—and that I am your humble servant. What do you advise?"

"Make the running, sir—make the running this very night; and, it's my opinion, you'll draw the old fox."

Kempton scrambled to his feet, and went feverishly up and down the room.

"Crowdie," said he, suddenly stopping in mid-career, "what's become of your wife?"

"My wife!" said the startled agent. "I have no wife, sir."

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"But you had one. Things like you always marry."

"It's a painful subject, Mr. Kempton. She—if—if you insist upon knowing—was untrue to me."

"I honour her for it."

Again he went up and down; and the agent sat stroking his chin in silence. Presently the young man came to a second pause.

"The Le Brun!" he said, slapping his hand to his forehead; "what's to be done there? I deny her right to jealousy, you know; but—she's the devil, Crowdie—she'll do the girl a harm—she must be got rid of!"

"She must be got rid of, certainly, sir."

"But how, you fool? Why, look here; she'd suffer, wouldn't she, if she saw herself bein' ousted from——? Damn it, sir! ain't I my mother's true son? We must spare Mathilde's feelin's. We deal in happiness, and she'd be happier away. To—to—what is it?—to do good that evil may come of it. That's our motto. It's all for her good. The evil needn't concern her. Good Lord! she's a weight on me."

"Certainly she's a very fine woman."

"Oh! talk sense."

"Mr. Kempton, I wouldn't worry about it, if I

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were you. I fancy, sir—I really fancy that Miss Matilda Brown is working up to her own ‘turning-off’ by congenital process. She’s not a friend to nature, you understand. She’s never been a friend to it since it made you—may I say?—its representative over that little business that cost her her health temporarily, and her voice permanently. It was a scurvy trick of nature’s, certainly. But I think, sir, from the moment (a year ago, was it?) that you wheedled—if I may venture—your august mother into playing the guileless rôle of protector to this—may we call it ‘ruined choir’?—Mademoiselle le Brun has been unconsciously, but very surely, preparing the way for her own discomfiture. And now, if she’s fool enough to resent the arrival of—of nature, why, she’ll precipitate matters without any interference from us.”

A sound of instruments tuning came to them from above.

“Hurry!” said Kempton. “Go and put on your livery, Judas. I’m wanted, I suppose.”

As he went up the broad stairway, he followed a parson and a girl who were ascending together. The latter looked over her shoulder, revealing a sharp but rather pretty face.

“What wickedness have you been brewing in your den, Kempton?” she said.

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"Only love philtres, Mary. Have a dose. It makes one attractive, you know."

"Does it?" (she leaned back and whispered, just perceptibly pointing her fan at her companion),  
"Then give *him* one, for Heaven's sake."

### CHAPTER III

LADY HONOR had, on this particular evening, limited her gathering to such friends and acquaintances as could be strictly natural on demand. She had decided to emancipate herself from conventions, and the best expression she could give to her resolution was by administering Joan as a corrective to artificiality. It was not, indeed, the first time that she had imperiously exploited some patent panacea. It probably was not destined to be the last. But, in the meantime, the remedy in question was, as always, the only remedy.

That her guests might be susceptible to the infection of nature, she asked them only to be themselves—about the most difficult part it is possible to play by request. There were present a natural composer, who could not read a note of music, and who had a vague idea that a leger-line was something to fish with; a natural poet, who was always falling into blank verse and coming out unrecognisable; a natural wit, who could not ask for a fork but somebody saw a point in it—all looking supremely self-conscious.

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There were, too, quite a number of naturals pure and simple, who were as easy in the demand made on them as are the gentlemen who, invited up to a conjurer's platform to see fair play, button and unbutton their coats and look too foolish even to be made fools of. But some of these warmed up as the evening advanced; and one even made a triumphant revelation of his real self by dancing a skirt dance. Poor Mademoiselle le Brun offered her little subscription to the vogue, and did her best to appear in a state of nature. But, it is to be feared, the impression she created was not that she desired.

"The more I see of that woman," said Lady Honor viciously, "the less I approve her."

Mathilde's day, in fact, was past; and all her liberal self-assertion only procured her swifter degradation to the ranks from which it had once helped to promote her. But that had been during the vogue of the "cakes and ale" cure.

Joan was the protagonist of the entertainment. The rest were inconsiderable supers. Lady Honor did the stage managing—literally; for Gatwick could boast something in the nature of a theatre,—the concert-room, it was called; but it had a platform and a narrow proscenium. This room and a conservatory were in that relation to the long drawing-

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room that its head and base are to the letter Z. Two people could ambush, one in each, with some sixty feet of open country between them.

Thus was the position—but disproportionately—at a certain period of the evening. The company was engaged with Miss Brotherhood in the concert-room ; Mademoiselle le Brun and Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie were the sole occupants of the conservatory.

The lady sat in a lounging-chair under a great camellia bush ; the gentleman on a stiff-backed seat beside her.

“Do you mind fanning yourself, and not me ?” he said sourly. “I’m not hot, you know.”

She trilled out a little laugh.

“But I am,” she said.

“Really,” he answered, “I don’t see the moral. Is it one of venting your heat on other people ? At least you should spare your friends.”

“Oh, quite so !” she said. “Oh yes, to be sure, you are my friend.”

“Ah ! that’s the right consistency of woman,” he said sneeringly. “Show ’em that they’re making fools of themselves, and they think you’ve a selfish motive ; tell ’em their hair’s coming down in the street, and they loathe you. I advise you, for your own sake, to withdraw yourself for a time—only for a time ; and this is the result.”



## Joan Brotherhood

"The result is that I, too, have claims that are to be considered."

He looked at her, with a perfectly blank expression.

"Claims!" he said. "I don't think, I really don't think I understand you. It may be very dense of me, but——"

"Tch-h!" she exclaimed, snapping apart the slips of her fan: "what is the need to insist on them? I can make them good, no doubt, at the right time."

"If only," he said, "you would take my advice, Matilda, not to hold yourself aloof like this—to affect an admiration, even if you don't feel it."

"Oh! but I do, Mr. Crowdie. Such a masterly *intrigante*, with her mysterious talisman of nobility, that no one has ever seen, and her divine gift—that no one, either, has ever recognised as yet, but that we are all to applaud by-and-by when her opportunity comes. Why, my sympathy is so great that I feel it will be my opportunity too."

"Listen to me, Matilda——"

A burst of applause from the concert-room interrupted him. When it had died away, she took him up—

"Tell me, then," she said, "if, to express this admiration, I did not hold myself aloof?"



## Joan Brotherhood

"It would be more to your advantage when the inevitable settlement comes, that's all."

"The inevitable settlement. Yes; that is a good word to end with. Let us pass to another subject. This old *nouveau riche*—this old glorified dustman in his new dress clothes—what do you think he looks like?"

"The hind-quarters of an elephant," said Mr. Crowdie promptly.

"And this beggar-maid," she went on, not deigning to notice him—"this meek and modest outcast, who came, with no ulterior designs, to look at King Cophetua—only to look at him—what is she?"

"A child of nature," said Crowdie.

She leaned over and tapped his arm several times with her fan.

"The children of nature are adventurers," she said. "Yes, that is quite right. It is their nature to hunt; but sometimes they are caught in their own snares."

She threw herself back in her chair, and nodded at him.

"They call her a swan," said she; "but I think she smells of sage and onions."

There came an opening swell of voices from the far end of the drawing-room. The recitation was over; the company was on the move again.

## Joan Brotherhood

Joan advanced, escorted by Lady Honor, the centre of a congratulatory throng. She was very prettily dressed, and carried her new state becomingly. No doubt in all her transformation she studied to vindicate her right claim to the amulet, though it hid no longer in her sweet bosom. But she knew where it lay, and her duty was to it there no less. She came down the room looking flushed and tremulous. A diamond (Stephen's gift) burned in her hair—a little moon caught in an elfin thicket; and the incense of praise floated like a cloud about it, dimming her sight and making her brain swim. She wore her beauty, as a novice wears her finest finery at the great renunciation; and Lady Honor played the part (and might have been dressed to it) of a diminutive abbess introducing her to the new order. As they came under the dropping lustres of the great chandelier, her ladyship stopped and held up her hand, like an officer halting his troop, to check the chorus of encomium.

"Now, good people," she said, "you've got to say exactly what you think. Miss Brotherhood won't thank you for indiscriminating eulogy."

"No, indeed," murmured Joan.

"Ah! what we think—yes, yes, what we think," said the wit, and everybody laughed.

There followed a dead silence.



## Joan Brotherhood

"Well?" cried Lady Honor, in high astonishment.

"You've stricken us dumb, Miss Brotherhood," said Kempton, with a little chuckle. "It's a tribute to your genius, by Jove."

"I've—ah!—no mind," began the poet—and stopped.

"Indeed?" said Lady Honor.

"I mean," he stuttered. "I've—ah!—no mind to speak of—" and he stopped again.

"Oh, please, don't trouble about such a little thing!" cried Joan innocently; and she opened her eyes to the babble of laughter her words evoked.

"What I was going to say," declared the poet, with indignant emphasis, "was, that I've no mind to speak of—ah!—defects, where the sum of perfection received confirmation rather than detraction from those little sweet and wilful mis-accented words with which the—ah!—fair declaimer elected to prove her golden numbers."

"A *sum* of perfection certainly," murmured the musician; "and a jolly difficult one to work out." But the poet heard him.

"You'll—ah!" said he—"find any sum difficult, my good Jack Harris, till you learn to count."

The word was with the poet. The wit regretted not having uttered it himself.

"Now, my children," cried Lady Honor impatiently, "*do* be yourselves and natural."

## Joan Brotherhood

"I'm sure *I* am," insisted the musician, scowling at his rival. "The question is——"

"The question is," said her ladyship imperiously :  
"Is, or is not, Miss Brotherhood great?"

But here, relieved of the personal equation, the chorus of praise rose again tumultuous. The air was stormy with superlatives. Stephen, hovering in the background, felt his eyes grow hot and damp.

"She's great, she's great!" cried little Veringer, dancing about, "greater than the Guilbert—greater than Lottie Collins. And she made me cry; and I'm never going to be naughty again," and he turned head over heels on a sofa.

Cousin Mary sat on him.

"Oh, damn!" he gasped.

"That's all I wanted," said she; and got up again.

Lady Honor, twittering excitement, pushed her way through the group. "Mr. Brotherhood," she said—"where's Mr. Brotherhood?"

She found him tremulous with gratification, and took him by his coat-lappels.

"You hear, sir?"

"I hear, ma'am."

"How much longer, then? When is she to have her chance?"

## Joan Brotherhood

He looked down uneasily, moistening with his tongue his dry lips.

"Ay, ay," he muttered. "Joan ought to show the world what she can do."

"Ought to!" cried the little lady. *Mais c'est une parole en l'air.* *Must*, my good man—*must*, positively. We know you can do it if you will. A theatre and a select little company in the off season,—and Perdita proves herself what she is—the sweetest little poet of nature!"

Kempton, in the background, was passively watchful of the effect of her words. She, for her part, was satisfied to have spoken them. She quitted her hold, and whisked about.

"Curds and cream for Perdita!" she cried. "She'll want 'em after this tax upon her nerves."

Joan protested. She needed nothing.

"Nonsense, child!" insisted the lady. "You must feed if you mean to entertain us. Who bids for the honour of taking Perdita down?"

Any one and every one, it would seem; but to the general astonishment (that found a tasteful expression in some private nudging and sniggering) the claim was put in from an unexpected quarter. A very pale young man, his face twitching painfully, came hastily from a little console table, at which he had been affecting an interest in some scraps of

## Joan Brotherhood

china, and offered his arm. Young Gatwick thrust his way between.

"Miss Brotherhood," said he: "it's my right, you know. I wouldn't waive it for a bishop."

Joan looked down, and up—and hesitated. Her eyes appealed to Gerard. She was so conscious of herself as a centre of curious regard that she would have liked to put all offers of escort aside, and run away to be alone a minute, and to collect her thoughts, and perhaps fight down a little inclination to shed tears. Then a thrill of rebellion against the tactlessness that could so inopportunistly suggest an unadmitted collusion made her cheek hot; and she caught sight of Stephen's face, surprised and frowning; and, in the immediate impulse of her feelings, she took Kempton's arm and intimated, with a queer little shaky smile, that the honour was his for all it was worth.

"It's beyond price, of course," said Kempton drawlingly, as they walked away.

"Come back a giant refreshed," called his mother after them.

Joan dwelt on her going.

"Won't—won't Lady Honor come too?"

"She never eats," said the young man. "She feeds on happiness, you know—other people's for choice. She's a perfect cannibal at happiness."

## Joan Brotherhood

"Does she leave them wanting it, then?" said Joan.

He laughed.

"You little sly-boots!" said he. "Are *you* feelin' unhappy, then?"

He felt her draw a little away from him.

"No, but I mean," said he—"with your beauty, and your prospects, and—and your amulet for a sort of certificate of anythin' you like to call yourself—how can you be, you know? Where *is* that amulet, Miss Brotherhood? Do you wear it hid away? I wish you'd show it me."

She was about to answer—with more petulance than indignation, alas!—when he caught sight of the agent standing alone just within the doorway of the conservatory, and stopped a moment to lean over and whisper in his ear: "You were right. He *has* asked for the interview."

The two passed on. Crowdie, coming erect, with an inexplicable face, took no heed of their going, but stood motionless, rubbing his chin.

The band in the concert-room was playing out an interlude—the "Faust" jewel song. "*Non l'oso toccar*—I dare not touch. The key!—Why, it cannot hurt to look!"

Joan, arm-in-arm with her destiny, walked away—away from the lights and the music—from sunshine



## Joan Brotherhood

into the eternal darkness—over the threshold that there is no recrossing.

Can you not find it in your heart to pity her?—She was vain, she was wilful, she was selfish perhaps—and I think she was never to know peace again. Never again, and she was not come of age. Poor Joan! poor water-witch!

As Crowdie stood, he heard a rustle behind him, and Mademoiselle le Brun came to the door.

“Eh!” he said, “where are you going?”

“To refresh myself,” she replied. “To drink with my eyes. Will you take me down?”

“No, I won’t,” he answered rudely.

She pushed as rudely past him. Little Veringer came pirouetting along the room. She captured him for her escort, and he went off with her ruefully enough.

Elsewhere the chorus of applause was settling itself to new interests, and Gerard was back at his console table. He had made no effort even to laugh off his discomfiture. He was incapable of it—as incapable as a sick man of jesting on his deathbed. A consciousness of a little foolish world with its tongue in its cheek at his expense pursued him; but he was too ill to heed it. His reckoning was with a devil of folly much more intimate to himself.

The company broke apart, and into a frolic mood.

## Joan Brotherhood

Some couples waltzed down the long room. Little men chased one another, and rolled in boisterous embrace over stools and fauteuils. Lady Honor looked on with infinite indulgence, as at the emancipation of nature from a dreary thralldom. She recognised herself for a beneficent Astræa, in the breath of whose geniality fetters melted and dropped like solder under a blowpipe. She almost felt that she had discovered nature ; that its highest Alp was worthy to be her monument.

Presently a fresh move was made towards the concert-room, whence—the interlude being over—came a sound of tuning instruments. In a minute the drawing-room was empty of all save two figures—that by the console table, and Stephen. The ex-bookseller yet lingered upon the footsteps of his retreated darling. He was preoccupied alone over what concerned her. He may have felt some bewilderment at the moral adaptability of society—at the way in which it could crown a feast of sweet reason with absurd caps out of crackers, as it were (a clog, or skirt-dance, greeted with explosions of laughter, had succeeded, it appeared, to Joan's heart-stirring recitation.) But he did not question that it was in human nature to relax after a strain, or doubt that society would hold immutable for his bird the position she had won in its heart of hearts.

## Joan Brotherhood

He walked a few paces, his hands behind his back, his eyes fixed on the floor. To any subtle physiognomist his face would have presented an extraordinary study of conflicting emotions. It was grown very grey in these days, as if all his reserves of blood had been called to the defence of his heart. Triumph, depression, exultation—a haunting apprehension—agitated expectancy—such enemies threatened that, front and flank. There was something in his expression that suggested the struggle of a dreamer, not to wake, but to go on dreaming.

In a moment he was aware that a figure barred his path as he walked. He looked up. Gerard stood before him, his eyes terrible, his breath going quick.

"Fool!" said the young man, "fool! Strip her of her borrowed plumes!"

Here may have figured the necessity for those reserves. Stephen felt the shock an instant, then rallied to an assault he must have foreseen.

"Borrowed!" he cried out sharply,—and recovered himself. "I pay my way, sir—I pay my way," he said, grimly but civilly. "I have borrowed of no man yet."

"Don't misunderstand me," breathed the priest. "She plays a part, the significance of which it is impossible for her to be herself and to grasp! For her!—My God! the fatuity, the supineness, the blind-

## Joan Brotherhood

ness of those who ought to protect and advise her!—the very vanity, God help her! that runs before to lead her astray!”

“Vanity!—My pretty bird!” muttered Stephen, a little break in his voice. Then he added, with retaliatory malevolence: “Isn’t it injured vanity that speaks, Mr. Latimer, sir? There’s no maid so vain as she that prefers a rival.”

The other never winced under the knife—hardly seemed to feel its stab. He was in a state of moral anæsthesia—careless of what new wound he might take in the cutting out of this cancer. His chest rose and fell convulsively.

“She must be helped, protected,” he panted, “even against her own will, or yours. I can endure it no longer. I——”

He held out his shaking hands.

“Give her to me, Stephen. With all my soul I love her—have loved her from the first. My God! you must know it!”

The man he entreated stood quite soberly and sombrely, deliberating every insulting word of his reply before he spoke it.

“I won’t say I haven’t foreseen this, sir. I will say I have done my best to spare you the vanity of it. Yes, vanity, Mr. Latimer, beyond the utmost my poor girl is capable of. Joan, sir—I will answer for her—

## Joan Brotherhood

has been struck, no less than I, with the bad taste of your pursuing us like this. Hasn't she shown it on every occasion? Didn't she show it to-night at dinner, when she took no notice of you beyond laughing with the others at the poor figure you cut?"

Gerard stood rigid.

"You are blind," he muttered.

"Ah!" replied Stephen, "not blind enough to mistake the motives of a hard-up parson professing love for a lady of Joan's prospects; not blind enough to overlook the meaning of his mysterious offers of help and protection."

He dwelt a moment on his words, but received no answer.

"Now, I'll do the right thing," he said, in the same measured voice, "and refuse your offer, finally and unconditionally. You've no reason to expect any other answer. I'm afraid you've the mote of vanity in your eye, sir, to see it so strong in others. If Joan poor didn't want you, Joan come to her inheritance isn't likely to. I tell you plainly, sir, she's meat for your betters. I tell you plainly you're better away from here, and that it'd be more decent for you to go."

He turned on his heel, making for the concert-room; but came about again, with some more definite emotion of anger in his face.

## Joan Brotherhood

"I've got my plans for her," he said; "and you may take it from me that I'm not going to have 'em stultified by an adventurer, however sanctimonious."

With that he went; and Gerard stood like a man of stone—for a minute, it seemed, actually paralysed.

Suddenly he became conscious of a name (like a distant sound, waxing hurriedly articulate, in delirium) uttering itself in his heart. It was preposterous. What had the name to do with the occasion? Wilson? Wilson?—Was it a question of how *he* would acquit himself under like circumstances? His soul twitched with a little rending spasm of laughter. Wilson would never have temporised from the first. Wilson would have dictated, not subscribed to, the conditions of his pledge. Were a woman, were any woman to desire that rugged faith, she must kneel to it, pursue it—over rock and briar, perhaps, with bleeding feet—and, like a dog, be content with the scraps thrown contemptuously to her. She *would* be content. The poor fool knew that. And he, whom Wilson himself had followed, whom Wilson had revered as a leader—!

He moved under his anguish. The name!—there was some other thought connected with its rising. Hilarius! Breathe on her! That was it.

He started forward, and stopped—aware on the instant that she and her partner had re-entered the

## Joan Brotherhood

room—were advancing towards him. He went on again a pace or two, staggering, as it seemed to himself. Then he saw the little swerve she made—saw the fear of him leap into her face—the fear of him!—and suddenly the two had come to where he stood, and had paused, a little apart.

It was she who had withdrawn her arm from her escort's.

"Please go on," she said; "I want to speak to Mr. Latimer."

Kempton stared, slightly shrugged his shoulders (the wild creature, affecting not to notice him, cursed, if the truth must be told, the act—the tacitly insolent waiving of a social solecism committed by those who knew no better), and went on his way loiteringly, with a yawning indifference. He had disappeared into the concert-room before Joan would move or speak; and then she came to her husband, and put a hand on his arm, and looked fearfully into his face.

It wrung his heart to feel her trembling; but he stood to it, without a word.

Suddenly she shivered, and fell a step away.

"What are you going to do?" she said, in a little, stiff voice.

"To retrieve my honour before God," he answered quietly.

"Are you going away?"

## Joan Brotherhood

"Yes—when I have told the truth."

"What is it? What truth?"

"That the woman who first persuaded me to falsehood, and then took advantage of my weakness to make her favour conditional on my silence—that the woman who misses no opportunity of lending colour to the common misrepresentation of my devotion to her as the presumption of an enamoured fool—that the woman who publicly accepts the attentions of a young snob and coxcomb, whose wealth is his only recommendation, is——"

"Stop!" she said, in a fierce whisper.

"—my wife," he ended.

She looked up in his face; and he would not return her look.

"You will do this?" she whispered.

"I will do it."

"Gerard! Now, when I am on the eve of realising all that I have——"

"It is damnable casuistry," he broke in—"false reason and false art. Art is truth—not a specious posing. To pretend that its realisation is one with personal circumstance that is—" (he stopped, breathing quickly; then went on)—"but that is outside the reckoning. Mine is with God, for having so long subordinated His divine mission to an infinitely little one of vanity."



## Joan Brotherhood

He let his eyes seek hers for the first time—a foolish Perseus neglecting his mirror. How soft and desirable they found this Medusa—how pathetic in her wonder at the cruelty of his attack. Perhaps she saw in a moment what she had gained.

“You will make your peace with God, then,” she said, “by shaming and ruining me?”

He wavered palpably. He put his hand before his eyes, and exclaimed in a broken voice—

“Joan! it is my duty—to you and to the trust I have accepted in you. You have only yourself to blame.”

She came quite close up to him.

“Very well,” she said; “do your worst, and hear me answer you for an impostor—hear what they think of the inspired missionary who, without proof or claim, is bent only on wrecking the happiness of a poor girl who was once foolish enough to believe in his honour.”

She swept from him; but he followed her.

“Joan!” he gasped—“Joan—Oh, my God!”

“Don’t come near me!” she said, turning on him. “Don’t hope to see or speak with me again. If you stay here, we must go.”

“Joan!” he whispered madly—“you mustn’t—you—I will unsay it all—I’m a dull brute—I will try to be different—more like Mr. Gatwick——”

He was aware of the figure of Mr. Cleeson-Crowdie

## Joan Brotherhood

come out from the conservatory, and even in his frenzy grasped the necessity of self-control. He came to a stop, turning from the sight of her going hurriedly down the room.

Mr. Crowdie stepped out. The girl almost ran into his arms.

"Forgive me," he said. "You are agitated—ill—really, it is quite evident. Let me take you——"

"Take me away—anywhere!" she said, too overcome for subterfuge.

He drew her arm through his, and led her down into the hall. It was a present refuge, large and soberly lit, with lounges here and there set amidst palms and tubs of camellia. Not another soul was in it, save flunkey James yawning in the atrium against the door.

Crowdie deposited his charge in a shadowy recess.

"Now, let me fetch you—" he was beginning, when the bell rang.

"Oh!" gasped Joan.

He sank on to the lounge beside her, and put a gently restraining hand on her arm.

"They will pass in a minute," he whispered.

"They won't notice us."

James flung open the door, and there entered, with an extraordinary expression of shrewd fatuity on his face—Uncle Michael.

WHENAS the speedwell of an eye  
Shall root within a soul as shy ;  
When beauty spare to scorn and flout,  
Because itself itself doth doubt—  
Cuckoo ! Cuckoo !  
Vanity shall cease its fairing ;  
Maids be maids beyond comparing—  
Cuckoo calls.

When Phebe shall rebuke her glass  
For flattering a simple lass ;  
And Bonnibel no longer ply  
The arts of conscious pudency—  
Cuckoo ! Cuckoo !  
Vanity shall end its fairing ;  
Maids be maids beyond comparing—  
Cuckoo calls.

When coined love shall cease to lend  
Itself unto a worldly end,  
And every Joan shall learn to judge  
How careless gift makes after grudge—  
Cuckoo ! Cuckoo !  
Vanity shall cease its fairing ;  
Maids be maids beyond comparing—  
Cuckoo calls.

Then, Phebe, let the cuckoo call,  
And answer, darling, not at all.  
If of yourself yourself is sure,  
In vain shall vanity allure ;  
In vain, in vain  
Love misterm for love his sporting,  
Selfish Blue-beard come a-courting  
All in vain.

## CHAPTER IV

Now the necessity of prospecting at every stopping-place on the chance of Mr. Latimer's alighting there ; the necessity of summoning his wits to the ordeal of that explanation, that was demanded of him by Bishopshead officialdom, on the subject of his travelling without a ticket ; the necessity, subsequently, of a little restorative sleep under a friendly haystack—all these, in the result, had produced a certain measure of sobriety in Michael. He was still, it is true, fou' with elation over the success of his strategy and over his prospective welcome ; and he was extremely dirty from lying on his improvised bed. But he knew what he was about and how to assert his position, even as he stood blinking on the mat.

Now, having more than once run errands to the houses of the wealthy, and having so learned to differentiate between the dress clothes (however faultless) of service, and the dress clothes (however seedy) of social prescription, it gave him no qualms to find himself confronted by a magnificent creature in swallow-tails and a white tie.

## Joan Brotherhood

"Good-evenin', young man," said he. "I 'ope I see you well."

James held him away persuasively with the door.

"Now, sir," he said, "what's your business?"

Michael opened his eyes and scratched his chin. Here was some bewildering social formula for which he had not been prepared.

"Call it genius?" he said briefly.

"You'd better try the next 'ouse," said James. "We don't deal in the harticle 'ere"—and he offered to shut him out. The playwright resisted, with a sudden manifestation of truculence. "Now, you take yourself off!" exclaimed the outraged flunkey.

Michael smiled loftily, as one who had only to explain, to command the situation—and stood immovable.

"I don't bear you no grudge, young feller," said he. "You're a meniad" (he was still a little shaky with his l's)—"you're a meniad, sir, and nasherally don't know a gentleman at large when you see him. But, when you're quite done, you can just go and tell the wealthy Sir Stephen that" (he tilted back his hat and caressed his throat)—"that—er—his brother is here accordid to his directions."

All this time Joan, in her angle of refuge, hardly breathed. She dared only to hope, in her over-

## Joan Brotherhood

wrought condition, that this fresh bolt from the blue would pass her by. Her companion sat staring, with a startled grin creasing his face.

"Well, are you goin', feller?" said Michael.

The man looked round with a helpless grin. Crowdie rose to his feet.

"Let him pass, James," he said; "and—and close the door."

The flunkey, excerning withering fire through every bar of his waistcoat, gave way just so much as was offensively expedient, sniffed, shut in the conundrum, and awaited such solution of it as might be offered in expiation of the affront to his cloth.

Michael had turned immediately to the voice. His eyes twinkled a demure recognition. He be-thought himself at once of the manner he had excogitated as that most expressive of his familiarity with the social requirements, and came forward, dipping and simpering, his left hand spread-eagled on his stomach, his right held out in effusive geniality.

"Ha! what do I see!" said he—"Mis-ter Crowdie, and—no, not my dear niece Joad!"

The agent put his hands behind him. The girl shrunk back, with a look of desperation.

"Uncle Michael!" she whispered. "Did—did daddy really ask you to come?"

## Joan Brotherhood

Michael made himself a double chin of delight.

"There!" he exclaimed. "Didn't I know 'twould be a great and pleasant surprise to ye!"

He permitted himself a declension to gravity.

"I won't go to say," he went on, "as Stephen asked me in so many words; but—a tip to a blind 'orse, sir—eh? you understand?"

"Not at all—really, I can't say I do," replied the agent.

"Eh?—Well, sir; he tell me that the fam'ly talents was to be put up on sush and sush a day, at sush and sush a place,—and he sent me—hem!—the means—jus' the meansir. What was that but a tip, knowid that Joad and I are booked to run together?"

He was offering to feel a little aggrieved. Joan, it was but too evident, was overwhelmed with anything but gratification.

"Upon my word, I don't think—I really don't think you must assume such an understanding from—" began Crowdie, when he was interrupted from an unexpected quarter.

"What! Mr. *Brotherhood*! This is indeed a surprise!"

Mademoiselle le Brun, coming from the refreshment room, had caught distant view of the situation, and with quick intuition had dismissed her partner and hurried to take her share in resolving it.

## Joan Brotherhood

Michael saw her coming, a brilliant commanding figure, breathing affluent beauty, and immediately committed himself to her protection. He giggled, as she took him by both his hands.

"Have you come to take your part in this delightful and amusing exhibition?" she asked.

"There! Why to be sure I have," he said loudly and joyously; "but it seems" (he intimated his grievance with a darkling side glance) "that I ain't expected."

"Not expected!" cried the lady. "That is nonsense——"

"Matilda!" exclaimed the agent desperately. She took no notice.

"We keep open house to-night," she said. "Any one—from the highways and hedges—with the least pretensions to entertaining us, we make welcome."

Crowdie uttered a second, but fainter protest.

"You do, ma'am?" said the jubilant compositor. "I thought I couldn't be mistook. Why, I brought the play with me."

Mademoiselle showed her white teeth.

"That is right," she said, nodding her head. "We needed that. I daresay we shall make a better show, with that to inspire us. It was a shame to think to cut you out of your share of the sport."

She held him captive. She would not venture



## Joan Brotherhood

to release him. He stood in a sort of reproachful ecstasy, drivelling triumph over his shoulder at the other two.

"*Won't* you take off your hat," said the lady insinuatingly (he whipped it from his head in confusion)— "and these little things in your hair?" she said, "what are they—straws? Now, you must have come hungry and thirsty from your journey. Don't tell me it isn't so?"

Michael's reply was almost a sob of rapture.

"I wouldn't go to deny it, ma'am," he said, "I wouldn't indeed. I've been travellin' all day on an empty bel——" He coughed, looked down abashed, and ended weakly, "I wouldn't deny it, indeed."

She gave him a little pull—drew on him coaxingly.

"Come with me," she cried. "Come with me at once, and I will feed you. Chicken, tongue, oyster-patties—what you will. And champagne—yes, you must have some in a tumbler. It is so inspiring."

"The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream. He awoke, and found it truth." Michael suffered himself to be led away in a sort of glutinous trance.

The agent had essayed a last gesture of protest, and had succumbed. Now he faced round on Joan, quite confounded for the moment, and for the

## Joan Brotherhood

moment lost to the potentialities of the situation. These did not break upon him till the girl rose suddenly, and stiffly, as if she were cramped with pain, and crooked her fingers to her cheek.

"What shall I do?" she whispered. "I can't stop here—I must be alone—I——!"

Then, in a flash, inspiration was vouchsafed him.

"Come," he answered hurriedly. "Here—yes, yes, it is beyond endurance—really, now—I think I may venture—under the circumstances—you must have time to recover—you——"

He was leading her, as he spoke, blindly—a dog leading the blind—into the oratory. He placed her in a chair before the fire—behind the screen.

"There," he said: "rest, and be quiet, and recover yourself. I will go and see if I can adjust matters. You mustn't move till I fetch you."

She gave a little whimper, poor wretch.

"How kind you are!" she murmured, shivering. "Nobody will come here?"

"Nobody," he said—"unless——It is Mr. Kempton's private room. None is allowed here but he, and he's engaged. Hush!"

He put his fingers to his lips, and stole on tiptoe from the room.

"James," he said, [in the hall, "you'll not be wanted here any more at present, I think."

## Joan Brotherhood

He waited for the man to withdraw before he ascended the stairs; and then he bolted up, three treads to a step. The drawing-room was still empty. Off it, at the further end, some one was whining out a comic song. He went swiftly and looked in. Kempton, as luck would have it, was standing within easy reach. He touched him, engaged his attention, intimated to him that he had something to say. The young man came, and they walked a few paces out of possible ear-shot.

"Mr. Kempton," then whispered Mr. Kempton's—agent, "the occasion's immediate, sir. I can't quite explain. Will you take my advice, now, without question and at once?"

"Go on."

"Give Mr. Brotherhood the interview, sir—at this moment, down in the oratory. Don't ask me why. It's best you shouldn't be handicapped with too much knowledge. Take my word for it the occasion's ripe. Really, sir. Well, I may tell you this. He's proposed and been rejected—the parson has. I'm sure of it; and sure of the moral. There's something else, too. She's very much agitated and upset—quite in the condition for a new shock. It ought to do the business."

The young man made a movement to go. His

## Joan Brotherhood

face was a little white — the utmost concession he could make to virtue.

"What an everlasting gridiron's heating for us some day, Crowdie," he said. "Very well. Tell the old fellow to come out to me ; and stay you here, and do your best to keep the company from movin'. Propose an impromptu from Jack Harris, or some-thin'."

"Leave it to me, sir, and—just one thing more. *Don't—go behind—the screen.*"

. . . . .

As Fate has no climaxes, but is always prepared to go "one better" on any question of *extreme* malignancy, so the power of human endurance has never yet been gauged. Men and women have yielded their lives or their reason to prove it. Either is for a refuge—neither means an abdication. Because they will go on thinking each harder stroke of Fate to be the last, until they are knocked out of time altogether, and cease to think.

To Joan, sitting before the fire, a brutal destiny seemed to have exhausted its resources, and she her power of resisting. But soon, from a mere numbness of misery, her soul rallied to protest—revolt—to a raging self-pity. She had risen only superior to circumstance, complaining little, cherishing noble ideals, waiting patiently to realise them—and the



## Joan Brotherhood

result shaped itself to look like retribution. Her past, which redounded to her honour, confronted her a persistent Nemesis. She had trusted, but to be disillusioned—had condescended to familiarities but to have them presumed upon to misrepresent her. And the one to whom, of all, she had committed her destiny would use it—secure in its possession—to his own ends, bribing her to acquiescence by threat of the ruin he could command.

Well, it was not ruin yet. She knew the worst now. Let her think, think, think—how it was possible to——

And then she gave a little gasp, for there were voices in the room. She shrank back in terror, incapable of speech or action, utterly incapable of the ordeal of confessing herself. This new tax upon her endurance——

God help her! It was her foster-father who stood for Fate.

"I thank you, sir," she heard him say. "The reason of my asking you for this interview is uttered in a few words. You know my antecedents, sir; and if I'm abusing the customs of a world that's new to me, why you must forgive me on the score of my ignorance."

"Well, we can speak plain, too," answered another voice—Mr. Gatwick's—"where our interest's touched.

## Joan Brotherhood

We're quite private here. What is it you want to say?"

He was rolling a cigarette, by the little, nervous, crackling sound. There was a slight pause, before Stephen continued huskily—

"It's about you and my foster-child, sir—how dear to my heart I won't insist on. There's no need, to those that know us. Ever since I took her, a mite, from the sea, I've grown in wonder over Heaven's bounty to me, as she's grown in loveliness of mind and body."

Kempton struck a match, and drew on the flame before he answered—

"She does credit to your bringin' up—that's plain. It isn't so plain, if you ask me, how you could take—what was it?—Heaven's bounty for granted, before you'd done all you knew to trace her out."

"Sir, I acted according to my lights," said Stephen humbly. "They might have shown another man the better way."

There followed a second silence.

"I'm ready to endorse all you say about Miss Brotherhood," said Kempton, discharging ceiling-wards a thin spit of smoke—"if that's what you want me for."

"It isn't, sir," said Stephen hurriedly; "but it

## Joan Brotherhood

makes my task easier. Mr. Gatwick, sir—Mr. Gatwick" (he moistened his lips)—"I've watched you—all the time we were in London—I'll speak plainly—are you fallen in love with my pretty bird?"

The young man exhaled more smoke—flicked the ash from his cigarette with his little finger—looked up suddenly and steadily into the other's face.

"Yes," he said.

Stephen drooped his head and breathed out a profound sigh.

"I thank my God!" he said, in a low, tremulous tone.

"Sir," he went on in a moment, raising his eyes, "what your answer means to me none but I can know. There's one other question I'd put to you—we may be interrupted—you'll let it pass again on that score of ignorance. Sir, you're rich and your own master. What reason is there for delaying the settlement?"

Kempton pulled again at his cigarette.

"None whatever," said he. "I shall be glad to hear what you propose."

"Get Joan's consent, sir, and it may be in a week for all I can see to object."

"I don't quite understand. You can give me the outlines here, I suppose?"

"The outlines?"

## Joan Brotherhood

"Of the settlement you refer to—the sum you are prepared to settle on Miss Brotherhood?"

There fell yet another profound silence. Stephen broke it at last, speaking, obviously, with painful effort.

"Is that the custom with the gentry?"

"With every sort of savage, I believe."

"Ah, sir!" (he had a gleam of hope)—"you're jesting."

"Am I!—Come, come, Mr. Brotherhood! the lady must be dowered. You'll excuse my imitatin' your candour. I'm not an exacting savage; but, talkin' of birds, you know, you're reputed to have feathered your nest."

"Joan is a fortune in herself."

"And you're her trustee, I suppose. Come, Mr. Brotherhood, a plain answer to a plain question."

"I can give nothing," muttered Stephen.

Kempton threw away his cigarette.

"Very well," he said coolly: "there's an end of it. Shall we go upstairs?"

He moved. The wretched legatee barred his way.

"Mr. Gatwick, sir," he said—"you don't mean it? If it's that you want something—some assurance that she's claims apart from the humble stock amongst which she's been thrown, take her, sir—



## Joan Brotherhood

in God's name give her her heart's desire,—and I swear that, if you wish it, I will never see her again—never expect aught of her—never let one connected with me intrude himself on her notice."

The young man showed a very respectable indignation.

"I don't understand you," he said. "Am I a snob and a bounder? Miss Brotherhood's claims want no backin'. She's a prize for any man to covet. The other's a matter of custom; and—and Lady Honor would insist upon it, if I didn't. Well, sir?"

"I can give nothing," repeated Stephen monotonously.

Kempton shrugged his shoulders, and moved again. The bookseller started into anguished life.

"Wait, sir, wait! I will tell you the truth. God help me—it must come out at last!"

"The truth!" exclaimed Kempton.

"It's this, sir—that Joan will break her heart if she knows."

"She need never know."

"She must—she must; the Lord pity me and her!—How I've watched for sign that you were in earnest—prayed for it—built upon it! Now I think my bird'll die if she's called upon to forego it all at this last."

## Joan Brotherhood

"Really, you must forgive me."

"This theatre scheme, sir."

"Well, how that's affected by my—by my enforced withdrawal, licks me. Perhaps you'll explain."

"I must," said Stephen.

He spoke in a suffering voice, twining and untwining his fingers.

"I must," he said—"because I've thought to make too much of a virtue of unworldliness; and my sin of default, the beast I've petted, turns upon me. If I was to undertake the trust, I should have striven to fit myself for it—perhaps to learn that pupil and teacher alike are none the worse for a little discipline. And now I'm helpless to control the ambitions I've started; and they run along a precipice. Sir" (he said, with the moving look of a soul on the rack asking mercy for another) —"when this two thousand pounds were first left me——"

"*Two—thousand—pounds!*" exclaimed Kempton, admirably astonished.

"Ay, sir—'twas no more—the murder's out. I know what it must seem to you. I've learned in a month, when set to it, the lesson that for fifty years I affected to think was beyond me. But at the first I thought it *was* a fortune—pretty well in-

## Joan Brotherhood

exhaustible, and that here were Joan's doves coming home at last."

"Two thousand pounds!" repeated Kempton.

"Ay, sir. Reproach me with it; only hold her innocent. When I came to know, to deceive the world for her sake, I must deceive her, that's the white queen of honesty. You know how we lived yonder in London. In a week I began to realise the truth—and, God forgive me, I was afraid to tell it—afraid to reveal to her that this quittance from the old bondage, this capping of a golden dream, was only a dream in its substance after all, and was fast dissolving day by day."

He came to an end for the moment.

"And—er," said Kempton (he was rolling another cigarette)—"what's the balance on the dream at present?"

"It amounts, sir, to thirty-four pounds, eight and threepence."

The lines about the young man's mouth twitched involuntarily.

"Well, Mr. Brotherhood," said he, "plain-speakin's still plain-speakin' at the eleventh hour; and I'm obliged to you for springin' your mine before I'd tied myself up on the top of it. What Lady Honor will think of this hocussin' business is another matter. But you, as Miss Brotherhood's

## Joan Brotherhood

respectable, if not very business-like trustee, can command me."

"If I only could, sir!—Mr. Gatwick—in the Lord's name! To tell her now it must all end!—it would kill her. Have her chance she must."

"On thirty-four pounds, eight and—what is it?"

"Won't you be the means, sir? Have pity on the girl. Why, they call it akin to love, and you love her—you've owned it. Lend me the money——"

He stopped, seeing the young man's forehead lift to an incredulous stare. His mouth was all shaking as he continued—

"Only enough to carry through this theatre scheme—a loan, sir, which is after all nothing but an investment. Why, when once she was started, we could pay you back in no time, and with interest, too."

"Oh, thanks for the tip. But buyin' a pig in a poke is flattered with bein' called an investment—notwithstandin' it's a learned pig. I've heard of such infallible investments before. They're thought a great deal of in the parish Unions. And she's to know nothin' at all about it, I suppose?"

"No, no, no! God pity her, she must believe I'm yet in the way to humour her!"

"I see. It strikes me as a pretty 'cute venture

## Joan Brotherhood

you're runnin'. You asked for candour, you know. You've a keener understandin' than one gave you credit for how to exploit a human patent. Have you any idea of the large sum necessary for this humourin' business?"

Crushed and despairing, Stephen made no answer—misunderstood, there is no doubt, the other's brutal innuendoes. Through all this reckless game he was playing, he had no thought but for what was utterly guileless and pure-minded.

Kempton was satisfied as to the crisis.

"Well," said he, "I can do no more than promise to consider such an unblushin' application. You'd best go upstairs and behave as if nothin' had happened. I'll stop here and think it over."

Like a bent old man the humbled legatee crept, with no word but a muttered note of thanks, from the room, closing the door softly behind him. Kempton stood, pricking his ears (veritably, *faisant le diable à quatre*). No intimation of another presence in the room had reached him during the interview. He could still only assume the agent's meaning.

Suddenly a smile like a spasm flickered on his face. A sound had come from behind the screen—a rustle and a little fall, like that of a fan. He set his teeth and stepped hurriedly towards the fire.

## Joan Brotherhood

"Miss Brotherhood!"

He had played so well that he could almost convince himself of the reality of his astonishment.

She was risen, and stood supporting herself with one hand on the mantelpiece. The little gold-haired Cyprian seemed to be discussing her with an insolent serenity.

"Let me follow him," she said hoarsely; "let me follow him—" and she made a tottering step.

He put a firm hand on her wrist.

"Hush!" he said, "you're overwrought, you know. Good God! what brought you here? How could I tell you were listenin'? You've heard it all, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, yes—every word! Why do you hold me? I must follow him. We must leave here, now, at once."

"I won't let you go till you're more yourself."

She drew back—snatched her hand away. The action released the pent-up stream of passion.

"Myself! Do you want to shame me to a confession of it! There, then—and there, and there!"

She tore the brooch from her bosom—the bracelets from her wrists, and threw them to the floor. She tried to wrench the diamond from her hair, and

## Joan Brotherhood

only tumbled her pretty plumes, and stood panting and disordered.

"I am an impostor," she said. "Isn't that enough! Let me go."

He stooped, picked up the trinkets, and held them out.

"These are yours," he said quietly. "I don't see the sense of such heroics. You had no part in this, and you aren't called upon to suffer for it."

"Not suffer!" she said, with a dreadful little laugh; "oh no!"

She broke out again—

"The cruelty and the baseness! To go back, after all I have—Oh, I will kill myself!"

"Listen," he said. "You need not go back—do you hear? You will take these from me as earnestness of it. Come, let me put the bracelets on again."

"From *you*? Not if it were to restore me all I've lost."

"It shall, I say."

"From *you*?"

"Yes, from me."

"*You*, who have never lost an opportunity of sneering at me, and showing me secretly what you thought of my pretensions? Do you think I have been blind?"

## Joan Brotherhood

"Quite—to my reason."

"It was a noble one, no doubt."

"It was a natural one—to a man of my temperament. You must have heard me give it just now. I love you, that's all."

She moved back, and made a motion as if to keep him away.

"No, no, no!" she whispered.

A wind of passion swept through his soul. In a moment that was flaming.

"You beautiful witch!" he cried; "you beautiful, beautiful witch! If you knew how this long time I have fought from surrender to you—how I have tried to deface your image in my mind that I might cure myself of worshipping it! And it's a tyrant, and I'm a rebel under tyranny. But I can hold out no longer, and I'm yours, and you shall be mine. And, for all the cursing of fate, you shall have your wishes and win your triumph, with me to help and protect you!"

She whispered again, in a panic voice, "No, no—you mustn't say it, or think it, or dream it!"

"Mustn't!" he said. "There's no such word to me. I'm goin' to lend this money to your foster-father. It's not a bargain, you understand. It's a commission paid to love, and you're free to *make* free with it apart from any consideration for me."



## Joan Brotherhood

She stood in a dumb agony of mind, looking down and knotting her fingers.

"No, no," she repeated, but in a fainter whisper. She may have fearfully admitted to herself the attraction of a certain boyishly masterful quality in his wooing, that he was not without a calculating knowledge of himself.

"Think," he urged, "think what it'd mean to you after tastin' blood to go back to the old life—you with all your gifts and your promise. To take your little profit of shillin's off those mouldy tombstones, instead of bowling along in your carriage and bein' pointed at for the great actress. To live again in the dirty little shanty with the old fellow who's deceived you and brought you back to it, instead of having a rich home of your own, with Love for your slave and master. And the memory of this bright holiday and the jeers of your acquaintances for accent to it all! You can't do it, you know."

She knew what she *could* do, and where her duty lay. But, rebelling from the mere thought of that, her broken-hearted whisper of "God help me!" might have been construed almost into blasphemy.

He made a movement towards her; and she retreated no further.

"He helps those, it's said, who help themselves. Come, let me put these on you again."

## Joan Brotherhood

He lifted her hand gently, but held it despite her weak struggling. In a moment the bracelets were snapped into place.

"Now the brooch," said he; but she backed from him again.

"Don't!" she cried, in a mad voice. "It can't be—it can't, it can't! Oh, go away from me—leave me to recover myself, and I will try to do what is good and right!"

For a moment they stood thus; then a sob, tearing, irresistible, broke from her, and he had her in his arms and had set his lips to her face, while she moaned and writhed.

"You shame and torture me! Let me go, for pity's sake! You shall!"

"Confess under torture, then. Say 'yes,' and I will."

"Never, never, never!"

"Say 'yes'!"

"You have no pity. I don't know what I say or do. To bind myself—it would have no meaning if I said it."

"Say 'yes'!"

"Kempton! Kempton!" shrilled a high voice without.

"It's Cousin Mary," he said. "I won't let you go without it. She'll come in very likely. Say 'yes.'"

## Joan Brotherhood

"No!"

"Say 'yes'!"

"Yes, then—but——"

He released her, but only partially. He still held her by one hand, while with his other he stroked her pale cheek and petted her hair into some sort of order.

"Poor little woman," he murmured, "poor little woman! Now we can hold out no longer. You must collect yourself, because we are called for."

"I cannot."

"You've got to."

He went to the door. He could regain such triumphant command of *himself* during that short passage, that the face he addressed to Cousin Mary was serenely intimate to that young lady.

"What are you liftin' up your little penny whistle about?" said he.

"What *have* you done with Miss Brotherhood? She's wanted. Auntie's wild that she doesn't come up to her engagement."

"Her engagement, eh? You take a back seat at that, you insignificant little groundling. She's been engaged lookin' over my curios."

He turned about.

"Come along, Miss Brotherhood," he said. "We're wanted upstairs."

## Joan Brotherhood

She came, blindly, it seemed, groping for the backs of chairs to steady herself by. He would not, from every motive of policy, go to her assistance. But, when she reached him, and made a feeble show of rejecting his help, he drew her hand firmly within his arm, pushed open the door, and led her up to the drawing-room and into the concert-room beyond. There was other pursuit of them besides Cousin Mary's; but that they did not notice.

The lights, the flowers, the company were all a dazzling and circumgyrating mist in the girl's eyes. She did not, indeed, know what she was doing—hardly what was expected of her, except that it was somehow to entertain a party of sight-seers.

Lady Honor came forward, her face eloquent of a certain surprised displeasure.

"*Here* you are!" she said. "What has been going on, pray, behind the scenes?"

She was frowning a little, and staring at the delinquent.

"It's your call, my dear," she said. "Have you been asleep? But never mind, we've had enough fooling for the present, and are all waiting for our Perdita to prattle us back to nature."

Joan muttered something inarticulate.

"Eh?" said Lady Honor.

## Joan Brotherhood

"Don't bother her, mother," said Kempton hastily ;  
"she's done enough for to-night."

"Nonsense," cried the little lady. "Done enough,  
where the entertainment of others is concerned !  
Now, darling—please."

Joan put a hand in a dazed way to her forehead,  
and, drawing her arm from its support, made a  
stumbling step forward and stood still.

"It's called the Moaning Well," she said, striving  
in a heart-breaking way to remember—to remember.  
"Sometimes, because of the tide or the wind, a cry  
will come from it like a dog's bay——"

A gasping cry broke from her own lips with the  
words. She had looked about her pitifully as she  
began, seeking, in the whirl and chaos, for something  
—somebody to help or remind her ; and her eyes  
had alighted on a couple who were just entering by  
the door. She turned immediately—ran to them—  
fell on her knees before one of the two and caught  
at his hands in an agony.

"Uncle Michael !" she cried. "What is it ? You  
are yourself still. I can't remember. I'm ill. Oh,  
take me home, Uncle Michael !"

## PART III

### CHAPTER I

IF Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie's conduct read rascality, it was a rascality not perverse, but deriving from a conviction. That was that love was the essential spirit of vanity. Why, otherwise, said he, should a woman cripple her unborn baby with tight-lacing? How, otherwise, can we reconcile love's desire to promote the happiness of its object, with love's determination to be itself preferred to a rival, however much more apt to the task? The little moons (he said) fall into the suns, either because they wish a larger glory for themselves, or because they would add a glory to the suns. Vanity, sir—vanity. Women's extreme affections are for the men who beat 'em, or for the men whom they can mother and cosset. No mutual sympathies or half-and-half amalgams for them; no respects without rapture; none of those dreams of unions of reason that your tickled poets scratch out of their heads at midnight. They must be the essential slaves or the essential

## Joan Brotherhood

nurses. They must flatter themselves they are indispensable, or they are without the vanity to love.

Love is the essential spirit of Vanity, said Crowdie ; and he turned up his nose—the acrid dog !—at the mere suggestion of love + self-renunciation as a known quantity. It is allowed to one to be unscrupulous in one's dealings with vanity, thought he ; and therefore he made his profit unscrupulously out of affairs of the heart—not his own unmarketable organ, but any other that it was his immediate interest to represent.

For instance : “ Sir,” said he to Kempton ; “ you must distil this vanity if you would convert it into the elevating spirit you desire. Keep a light burning under it ; heat it, boil it, until it condenses and returns upon you, an intoxicating dew.”

The scoundrel, you see, was himself—like most of his kind—something of a poet ; and that, no doubt, was to account for his intimate knowledge of vanity.

Now his advice, in the result, saw Joan (still innocent of the worst) restored from prostration to hope—to confidence—to a fever of daring ;—not again (that were impossible) to peace of mind. Because she was consciously blinding herself to what she staked on the throw ; because she *would* not acknowledge to herself the nature of the consideration on which she secured her opportunity.

## Joan Brotherhood

Not that her heart was not inherently guileless still. Only she knew—she must have known—that one sort of repayment (and that the best) for help rendered, it was beyond her power to make. To what did she look, then? To nothing, I am afraid, but to the fulfilment of her ambition. To that one dream, that had so nearly eluded her, that she had so painfully recovered, she held on with a mad tenacity—with a mad belief that its realisation would vindicate and remedy everything. Any more definite resolving of intervening problems she would postpone till after the event; and in the meantime she inclined to Kempton, of all people, as the one most influencing her destiny; his right to the least control of which, Gerard, by leaving Gatwick unnoticed, immediately after his final scene with her, had apparently renounced. To be sure, it must be confessed, she so justified his principles to the agent, that he could use her to his full profit without a qualm.

But, though it was by his advice that Kempton fanned the embers of vanity into flame, by his advice that the money was advanced, the company selected, the theatre taken, the rogue was too astute, on his employer's behalf, to play for the débutante's success. It was not his policy to make her solvent. And so—no sooner were arrangements completed and the day fixed, than he—too firm in his principles to doubt the



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upshot—wrote anonymously to Miss Matilda Brown (now relegated to a little flat in West Kensington) to acquaint her of these facts—and of one or two others.

. . . . .

One morning, Miss Brown—shopping serenely and desultorily as she went, in view of the forthcoming season—made her way to a little theatre in Soho. Reaching it, she was gently inclined to dwell upon certain posters, lolling about the building, that announced the rising of a new star upon the following evening. She laughed a little, and entered the theatre lobby. To all appearance London was but languidly interested in the phenomenon. Stars, grandiloquently advertised, were wont to reveal themselves very sorry lights when seen through its murky atmosphere. There was one rather doting old gentleman—who wore his hat at a rakish angle—at the box-office ; and that was all.

She ensconced herself in a comfortable seat while the old gentleman drivelled. And then all at once the door swung open, and there entered together two men, one of whom was Mr. Latimer.

He saw her at once—started—hesitated, and came forward. His companion—a small, austere, and uncouth individual—remained standing by the door.

She smiled, leaned forward, and held out her hand. He had no reason to refuse it, and he did

## Joan Brotherhood

not. Even through her glove she could feel how clammy and tremulous was his palm.

"Why," she said; "what has become of you all this time? And such an astonishing and informal leave-taking!"

"I couldn't help it," he answered, sicklily equivocating. "I—I remembered something—I had to go—I—" (he looked nervously over his shoulder and back again). "And so the great adventure is imminent, is it?" said he.

"Meaning our dear débutante's?" said Matilda. "Why, you are engaged to it, of course?"

"Yes, yes. How does she face it? Is she happy and confident?"

"She has every reason to be, I am sure. Besides, she has secured her retreat if she fails."

"How, do you mean?"

She shook a finger archly at him.

"Oh, you men, you men! from schoolboys always so loyal to your odd traditions. I'm sure I am not going to be drawn into enlightening your pretended ignorance."

He stared at her, with some vague emotion of horror in his heart.

"I am utterly at a loss," he said.

"That's right," she answered. "Never tell tales of one another. For myself, I mean nothing and



## Joan Brotherhood

know nothing. I have long concluded my visit to Lady Honor, and am returned to my own rooms in Kensington. Will you not call upon me there?"

He muttered some shamefaced excuse. At present he was too much occupied.

"That I can see," she said; "and can forgive the rudeness for it. Look, the old gentleman has gone. I am in no hurry. You can be the next."

He bowed, in a dazed manner, and went to take his stall (he should have bargained for a rack of thistles with it); then turned about again, again hesitated, and finally raised his hat and left the building hurriedly.

He had made so sure that Wilson (who—back in London—had already chanced upon and was haunting him) would follow in pursuit, only to renew his hateful and futile catechising of him and of his acts and motives, that, finding himself undogged by the dreaded presence, he rose to a condition of mind that was elation by comparison with his earlier state.

He did not exult long. The shadowy horror evoked by that woman's words returned and quenched his light. He walked with a worse familiar, the more terrible because it was shapeless, undefined, a phantom. With all the speed he could muster, he made his way to Piccadilly and along it westwards till he reached a certain by-street. Here—a very

## Joan Brotherhood

haggard self-conscious detective—he set himself to watching a particular doorway, a doorway associated with the image of one whom he had traced hither from the little Soho theatre where (as he had read in some journal) she was rehearsing for her début. Presently (Heaven tolerate him!) his patience was rewarded. A man, an old and bent man he looked, came out of the house and went slowly up the street.

“God forgive me!” thought the watcher, with an inward gasp. “Why do I shame her by this irresolution of belief? They are Stephen’s rooms. Only he and she live there.”

In the meantime Wilson, left standing within the theatre lobby, took stock for a few moments of Miss Brown, then walked over and accosted her with a blunt directness. He might not, impelled by a certain urgency of affairs, have hesitated to do so in any case; yet in the present instance his freedom would seem to be prompted by some professional experience of *nuances des caractères*. He was not wont, where the Lord’s work offered itself, to wait for introductions to the confidences of ladies to whom all introductions are a superfluity; and here, he was disinclined to doubt, was one who, from her manner and appearance at least, would be willing to dispense with them. So he bent his swart brows on her and spoke, ever with a touch of the arrogance

## Joan Brotherhood

that made him always such an unpalatable little Jeremiah.

"You'll excuse me, lady. We've a common friend, it seems, in the gentleman that's just gone out?"

Miss Brown lifted her fine eyebrows, and sank back in her seat.

"I beg your pardon?" she answered, with great composure. "Are you speaking to me?"

"Yes, I am," said Wilson.

"I didn't quite understand. Of your being somebody's common friend, was it?"

"I'm Mr. Latimer's friend, I said."

Wilson was thick-skinned and truculent as a rhinoceros. He was only considering where to charge, as he stood looking down preoccupied.

"I'm his friend, to be sure—and somethin' more," he said suddenly. "I'm interested, above his wishes, in his welfare."

Now Matilda had also been considering.

"Are you?" she said brightly, as if comprehending all in a moment. "That gentleman's friend? Mr. Latimer's friend? Why, so am I. How delightful! But he is a very difficult man to help—or even approach."

"He wasn't once, I'll tell you," said Wilson. He waved his hand vaguely in the direction of a poster. "It was somethin' in this connection changed him," he said.

## Joan Brotherhood

Miss Brown rose quickly to her feet.

"I am deeply interested," she said. "I should like to talk to you about him. Not here. Will you just wait while I finish my business?"

Wilson stood aside. She nodded to him, smiling, and hurried to the box-office. There she booked for quite a number of people, it appeared. She spent nearly all the spare cash her shopping had left her on seats in different parts of the house.

"Now," she said, turning to him, with an envelope in her hand stuffed with bits of pasteboard, "I am ready. Will you walk a little way with me?"

He followed her into the street. They strolled on together.

"So, you are Mr. Latimer's friend?" she said. "And he won't let you help him. To Miss Brotherhood, do you mean?"

He stopped her with an action of protest.

"What do *you* mean?" he said roughly.

She stared at him a moment, then moved on composedly.

"Do you know you are taking a great liberty?" she remarked. "I make allowance for the class from which Mr. Latimer, it seems, is in the habit of choosing his acquaintances; but, because I pass over your ignorance of the proprieties in addressing me, you mustn't take advantage of it in this way."

## Joan Brotherhood

"It wasn't my intentions to give offence," he muttered, with a sort of surprised sullenness. "I'm a plain man, and I saw we both knew the gentleman, and that you two were met in that damnable place on a common business. I thought nothin' of the rest."

She laughed, with a little trill of high amusement.

"Now," she said, "let us first of all know where we stand. Who are you, if you please?"

He told her, bluntly; and of his connection with the young priest; and of how and why they had parted on their mission. And there he stopped.

"But, you're *her* friend," he said, glowering.

"Oh! Am I?"

"You were there, taking tickuts, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Subscribin' to her vanity?"

"Yes. Or to the cure of it."

"I don't know what you mean. You haven't told me who *you* are yet, miss."

"I thought I explained that I was Mr. Latimer's friend. And so these two are really engaged—have been for a long time, in fact?"

"His friend—you—and not know it?"

"No, I didn't know it. Nor anybody else, I am quite sure."

The man gave a gasp of rage.

## Joan Brotherhood

"It's of a piece with the rest," he said.

They walked a little way in silence.

"You heard of old Mr. Brotherhood's good fortune, I suppose?" said Matilda presently.

"Yes," he said; Mr. Latimer had told him of that. It was one of the two significant pieces of information he had succeeded in wringing from him, here in London, since he had alighted upon him again. That, and the fact that the Jezebel who had practised on him in her days of unfulfilment, was proving his (Wilson's) opinion of her.

"For anything else he's as close as a miser," said he.

"Yes," she answered airily. "You'll hardly believe we don't even know where he's buried himself at present."

"Don't you?" said he; and he gave her Gerard's address unsuspectingly. She made a mental note of it; and they walked on.

Suddenly he struck fist into palm, and broke out, in a low violent voice—

"Woe to her! woe to the wicked trull as robbed the Almighty of His servant, for the reason that her need was greater than His, and now mocks in the face of the Lord, revealing herself a show and shameless decoy in the places of iniquity."

"Hush!" said Miss Brown, a little panic-stricken.



## Joan Brotherhood

"Mr. Latimer will think none the worse of her for that. He will countenance it all, you see. If it is his welfare that you—that *we* seek——"

She stopped ; and he looked round at her, while he breathed heavily.

"Well ?" he muttered.

"Nonsense," she said, with a little artificial laugh. "Why should I interfere at all ? I can quite see why she didn't wish to be hampered with a report of her engagement to any one but the public. If she risks her reputation through this exhibition of herself, she can always recover it by marrying him. Unless, indeed, the whole performance proves a fiasco."

"And, if it does," he put in savagely, "she'll be the more willin' to give, and him to take, the leavin's of the public, I suppose ?"

"Oh, I don't think so !"

"*Don't* you ? Well, I do."

"I am really at a loss to know why you speak to me at all," she said frigidly.

"Didn't I tell you," he answered, "that it was because I saw you was acquainted with him, and 'oped you might know more about his affairs than I can learn ? They may even be married now, for all that appears."

"Very well. Now, I will tell you I suffered this intolerable liberty only because I understood that

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we both had Mr. Latimer's welfare at heart. But I find you are a rude and violent man, and I will request you to leave me."

He looked at her, and humbled himself.

"I'll ask your pardon. I'm all you say; but I feel strongly in this here matter. Speak as you wish. I'll not contradict you again."

"Are you sure? You mistake my position, I think."

"Very like. I'm sorry. There, now!"

"Well; I tell you they are not married; and I tell you a fiasco to-morrow night won't bring them any nearer being so."

"Why not? 'ow do you know?"

"I *do* know. That's enough. You think the girl independent. Well, she isn't. I was told that in confidence" (oh, letters anonymous!—the modern reversion of *lettres de cachet*, that *accuse* without *committing*!) "and I give it you in confidence. Failure will ruin *her*, and will, I think, destroy for ever Mr. Latimer's hopes of her. You must take my word for it."

He stared before him as he walked.

"I will," he muttered hoarsely. "I don't want to ask no questions."

He turned his stare upon her as she moved beside him.

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"It's plain *you* ain't no friend to the gal," he said.

"How can I wish *him* good, and be so?" she answered, demurely sorrowful. "You see what she is."

"I see," he said; and, rousing himself, cursed her name beneath his breath.

"To recover him to God's service!" said Matilda, in tremulous fervour. "Oh, that we could make it our mission to bring that about without hurt to another! But he would rise on her fall."

He caught at her sleeve and stopped her. He was panting like a dog.

"Naboth before Jezebel!" he said. "The Lord would justify it."

She looked at him pitifully.

"It could be done—but I am afraid. You mustn't ask me."

"I don't. Tell me some things; and leave the rest to me."

"Not here. You must take me home. Will you, please? I am quite overcome. I can suggest nothing till I am more composed. It seems so like a conspiracy. But it is a conspiracy of righteousness, is it not? You must convince me of that, or I will not take a step to help you. Please call a cab."

He set his teeth—pondered a dark moment—then raised his stick.

## CHAPTER II

LADY HONOR, driving down Piccadilly in a cab, suddenly waved to some one, and hailed the man to pull up at the pavement edge. Her son came to the door.

"Aldeborontiphoscophornio!" said he: "I thought you were at Gatwick?"

"So I was two hours ago. Have you lunched, Kempton?"

"Yes'm."

"Well?"

"Oysters, devilled kidneys, a ripe little nugget of Wensleydale, and two-thirds of a bottle of Château Yquem '91."

"*Cela s'emmanche bien, mon enfant.* You hold two-thirds to be the psychological measure, don't you? You must be in a rare good humour."

"I am."

"That is just what I want. Now get in, and take me to your chambers."

The young man drew back, hesitated a moment, laughed.

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"Well, they're empty at the moment," said he. "All right. I'll follow—" and he directed the driver to go on.

His rooms were on the first floor of a house in Half-Moon Street. He climbed the stairs to them, with a queer sensation of effrontery stinging his brain. He found his mother—the sober, dove-like little abess—standing in the front room, regarding with some curiosity certain of its appointments—a table, to wit, choicely spread, even at this early hour of the afternoon, with a very banquet of cates and wine. The curtains of the window were partly drawn together, half shutting into a wide bay a cosy-bodied lounge, and all the glass and silver displayed blinked slumberously in a drowsy light.

"Are you entertaining?" said she, with a little gravity. "It is the débutante, I suppose. I hope the foster-father is invited."

"Not only he, ma'am, but, by his especial request (pretty coldly acceded to, I must say), a couple more of his kidney."

"Who do you mean?"

"The brother, for one. You'll remember him?"

"Dare to remind me of it, sir! That shocking scene! I've never been able to feel the same towards Nature since. And who's the other?"

"Josiah, or Joshua, somethin'. The old man was

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keen on it—humble, but pretty determined. They were all cronies, it seems. The triumph would be incomplete without them; and so they've been sent for to swell the feast."

"Or the feast them, do you mean? But, I hope there's safety in numbers. And is it going to be a triumph?"

"Of course it is."

She looked at him intently.

"Of course, eh? I wish I knew what you were up to, Kempton. I have suffered such disenchantment, such a warping of my moral fibre in the exposure of these people, that to have cut myself absolutely adrift from them is the best mercy I can show. In my present frame of mind—for which they are responsible—I could only interfere to their further injury. But I don't want you to entangle yourself with an adventuress."

"Mother," said the young man, "I'm in a good humour still. This exposure you speak of is a little more than the truth. I'm sure you never had a word of it from me."

Lady Honor sat herself down, and smoothed out her skirts.

"*Enfin*," she said quietly. "I had to be born before you could be, my child. You have been very silent—and loyal, shall we say? But I know—I know."

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"What do you know, then?"

"For instance, that these two are living upon you—here, in your rooms."

"Is that a guess?"

"A shrewd one, if it is."

Kempton laughed.

"Well," said he. "It's all in the bond. I'm to rack-rent 'em for it when their treasury overflows."

She pursed her mouth and shook her head.

"I ought to interfere, you know, for your sake," she said. "I hope at least you've given 'em sole possession?"

"Oh yes! I sleep out—here and there."

"And now tell me. I'm curious to hear. How does the girl hold herself towards the old rascal, now he's unmasked?"

"She'll hardly speak to or notice him; that's a fact. I'm sorry for him sometimes—upon my word I am."

"It says a little for her. Perhaps, after all, she knew less about it than one thinks. Why didn't she marry that respectable young clergyman at first, the deuce take her, and save us all this annoyance? What's become of him, I wonder?"

"He's here, in London."

"How do you know?"

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"He's been seen."

"I suppose I ought to guess who is your *amicus curia*. I ought to interfere before you get yourself into trouble. It's all most bewildering; and I meant very well by Nature—very well indeed. I've a mind to send for Mathilde again. I will, I declare, and take her with me to Paris."

"Are you goin' to Paris?"

"Almost immediately. It was that brought me up to you. A M. de Blague, who was a friend of your father's, has been to see me at Gatwick. In fact he is there now. He's a most extraordinary man. He has always shown the quaintest attachment to me. He is a devil-worshipper—a very strange man indeed. He has quite convinced me that this bolt was flung to procure my salvation—something like the fire that converted St. Paul—only the other way, you know."

"You ain't goin' to be converted to the devil, mother!"

"You don't quite understand. He is such a gentleman."

"Who? The devil?"

She nodded.

"The name is nothing. It is only the obstructives and malcontents who have made it opprobrious for their own purposes. He is the first of Tories. His



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political creed is the oldest. Think, *mon p'tit blondin*—he was before Zoroaster, before Buddha, before Christ, before Mahomet. They were all engaged to contest his seat—the generations of reformers and propagandists, and he smiles with his eternal courtesy, and holds it still. He is the manorial lord of the earth. He is the real Nature; in my estimate of which I find I was utterly mistaken."

"He holds his seat, to be sure, mother. I suppose he'll always command a majority."

"It's the minority that makes the dissension, Kempton. If we are all agreed, it don't signify by what name we call our party. Indeed, there would be no faction. Peace and harmony would prevail."

"In heaven, accordin' to the books."

"They are radical tracts. We can't reconcile the laws of Nature with the laws of Heaven. We can't be ourselves and strangers to ourselves. We're all wicked by nature. Even the churches admit that. It's the efforts of some of us to be good that make the confusion. Let us be natural—every one of us—and peace follows. Christianity don't aim at anything better. Only Christianity takes us out of ourselves, and makes us monsters. If we are bad, without exception, harmony only comes

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to be a question of terms. The devil would have no reason any longer to set us by the ears ; Heaven would have no case against us. We should only have to call bad, good, for it to be so. We have got hold of the wrong end of the stick, and have been trying to walk with it all these centuries."

She took a long breath, and went on, with a most satisfied air.

"I see it quite plainly now. It was simply that I went astray in identifying nature with innocence, the preaching of which is merely a party expedient. We want a general relapse."

"The devil to come to his own, eh ?"

"Exactly."

The dutiful son laughed ; but he shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all right !" he said. "And is that why you are goin' to Paris ?"

She nodded again.

"It is the camarilla of taboo—a very select one, to be sure. But if one worships the devil, one must pay for it ; and I am rather hard pressed at the moment. I want you to lend me a thousand pounds."

The young man opened his eyes and whistled.

"Great Scot !" was all he said.

"Ah !" she put in at once. "I might have known

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what it was. You are suffering all the expenses of this egotistical folly ; and your mother's welfare, her happiness and peace of mind, must be subordinated to the inconceivable vanity of an *intrigante*. Kempton, I can't allow you to be so victimised. I must interfere, and see the girl."

"I think it is I should interfere, and see M. de Blague."

"There shall be no need, you wretched boy. I intend to stay at home."

"Well, mother ; I will find you the money."

Lady Honor rose.

"You can do as you like about that," she said. "Good-bye, for the present. If I find I am able to go, you needn't expect to see me again for some weeks."

### CHAPTER III

It was eleven o'clock at night, and all the array on the supper table had flashed into a thousand sparkles of invitation. There was not a light flowering on the walls of the room in Half-Moon Street that could not see itself a star in a hundred facets of glass, a galaxy of saintly glories on the rims of finger-bowls, a topaz or burning carbuncle in the depths of half-a-dozen decanters. All the outcast rays of night, harried by a dark and flying sleet, seemed to have taken refuge in this casual ward of comfort, and, quit of shuddering, were basking and blinking as they renewed themselves in the glow. The curtains were drawn across the bay of the window; the good fare, beset with steel and silver, was defined in its every enticing detail against stiff napery; and appetite waited upon it before the fire.

Here, one on each side, sat Michael and Joshua, respectable in broadcloth, and much collar, and attenuated wisps of ties. They were the early arrivals. They had, in fact, been rather hustled out

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of the theatre, the moment the performance was over, by Mr. Gleeson - Crowdie (who had some manœuvring to acquit himself of), and had been directed to find their way to Half-Moon Street with all speed.

They heard the sleet storm fitfully on the glass ; they heard the flames of the fire flap and creak—and they stared into the coals rather than into one another's faces. For the soul of each was troubled with a certain awe that it was fearful of seeing reflected back upon it.

Joshua made a desperate effort at last, and spoke out.

"Well?" said he.

It did not seem a weighty remark, save inasmuch as it broke the ice. But Michael recognised a significance in it, and in the black eyebrows bent upon him. He sighed, and shook his head.

"There's no denying it, Joshua," he said. "The whole thing went to pieces."

Joshua scratched his neck in impotent aggravation.

"It all turned upon that pound of flesh," he said.

"What did Joan want asking for the undercut?"

"*She* didn't, you idjot," said Michael dolefully. "The undercut was put into her mouth, and then, 'A little bit off the top, dear!' says some one in the 'ouse; and that finished her."

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Silence took them again.

"She didn't have no chance," said Joshua presently. "I've been worried at odd times by the gal and her airs; but this was a black shame. If it's London manners, give me Frimlington."

"Ah, indeed!" said Michael, "we don't make no pretensions, but we could teach 'em a thing or two. We watch their games, and could suggest a move sometimes. Joan may have been led to believe by London that William Shakespeare was a author bustin' with opportunities to a dramatic tyrant. Well—I shouldn't like it to be known, mind—but, in my opinion Shakespeare's crood. He's cur'ously un-particular about his lines, for one thing. They ain't measured to reg'lar lengths—so many ems wide—as they should be. Sometimes he'll start a character with a line, and then, finding he's run down, pass it on, without troublin' himself, to the next speaker to finish. Of course he were good raw meat in his own time; but he wants a deal of dressin' now to make him go down. Now, if the girl had only chosen to risk her fortun' on the 'Jester'——"

For once Mr. Stillbody accepted the name without enthusiasm.

"Don't be a ass!" he put in caustically. "Why, it ain't even finished."

"Sir," said Michael, loftily surprised, "it may *not*

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be finished, as you superfluously remark ; but a livin' fragment, I will modestly submit, is better than a 'ole tomb-full of dramatic corpses."

He subsided, breathing hard, and silence ensued again, but not for long. Michael, inspired perhaps by his own gastronomic metaphor, was soon on his feet, prowling round the table.

"How long, O Lord ! how long !" he seemed to mutter abstractedly. Then he said aloud, as his eyes dwelt lover-like on the plump breast of a turkey : "Joan won't have much appetite for all this, I expect. We shall have to eat hard, neighbour, to keep her spirits up."

Mr. Stillbody grunted, and, moved in his turn, rose and came to examine.

"I wonder if Mr. Latimer's asked," said he, "seein' he were in the the-ater ?"

Michael shifted uneasily. He had some uncomfortable remembrances of his last meeting with that gentleman.

"Of course not," said he. "Isn't he a red rag to Stephen ? I don't know what took him there. I did 'ave a suspicion once that Joan's break-down and layin' up at Gatwick were somehow doo to her hearin' he'd left the 'ouse ; but I'd no more than to 'int it to my afflient brother, to 'ave 'im turn on me like a basilica. Yet it 'pears to me he still hangs

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round the girl; and, I'll say honest, he seemed more our friend to-night than any one in the 'ouse a'most. To see him turn with his rampageous face to the 'ootin'!—I were minded to cry in a frightened way, 'It isn't me, Mr. Latimer!'—only he were that distant I was abashed." (He had been in the stalls, indeed, while the two friends had been deposited at the very back of the dress circle.)

"Ah!" said Joshua. "Well, I wish Stephen'd just look in to warrant us startin'. Not a sign have we seen of him since he come and nodded to us in our seats. My stomach covets to begin. What are them things stuck in glue?"

"'Tis prawns in jelly, ye doit—a pleasant device to flatter the expectation, like sassages fryin' in a shop winder."

"And that great tongue without a mouth! Michael, it makes the whole room look as if it were pantin'."

"Don't you try it, Joshua," said Michael, firmly and warningly. "It's my province, and you're no good at it. Prose is your forty, my lad."

He circumambulated the board, waxing revolutionary.

"A little furer," he said, "and I shan't be able to keep my claws off that lobster's. *Won't* somebody come!"

As if in immediate response, a rapid footstep



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sounded on the stairs. The two cronies scuttled to the fireside, where they stood, flushed with guilty unconcern.

The door was flung open, and Mr Crowdie entered hurriedly. His eyes blinked red. His sharp face was shot out of a great fur collar, like a ferret's taking stock from a bush.

"Ah!" he exclaimed. "Only you two! That's right. Now, my friends, you must pack and be off!"

Their jaws dropped. They fell limp on the instant.

"Pack!" whispered Michael, utterly aghast.

"Yes, yes. Make haste, now. Miss Brotherhood is completely upset. She sends a message that she is very sorry, but that she is quite unfit for company. She asks you to take from the table whatever either of you fancies most, and—and, in point of fact, to consume it elsewhere."

"She!—Joan!" gasped Michael, completely paralysed, it appeared.

Joshua, with admirable self-possession, was already cramming his capacious pockets.

"What we fancy most!" said Michael, still stupefied, but waking to a sense of urgency.

"Yes, yes," bustled the agent. "Whatever you like, only be quick. Now, don't delay, my good soul. If she comes while you hesitate, you'll have to bundle out supperless."

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Michael came to himself, and to Joshua's assistance, at the same moment.

"Steady, neighbour!" he cried, between grief and anger. "That lobster's bespoke. Get out! There, now! I will!"

In his nervous grabbing he had "palmed" a jam tart, and, unable to rid himself of it in the struggle, had squashed it to fragments on the other's large face.

"Ha' done!" roared Mr. Stillbody, spluttering paste. "Where's your manners!"—but Michael was taking advantage of his temporary blindness to reap a harvest.

Presently they stood back, bulging all over and a little ashamed of themselves.

"I'm shocked at you—there, I am!" said Joshua, vainly trying to button his coat over a cold chicken.

Mr. Crowdie thrust a bottle of wine apiece into their hands.

"Finish your dispute outside," he said. "Now, now, now——"

He was urging them before him. Suddenly Michael brightened.

"Share and share alike, neighbour," said he. "It's all beyond tellin'; but we'll e'en back to our tavern and make the best of it."

They vanished; the blinding night received them and their cargo; and the agent, fully secure

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in their retreat, returned to the supper-room in the same hurried way and rang the bell.

"A hansom," he said to the man who answered. "Be ready with it at any moment."

Left to himself, he took a few agitated turns up and down the room.

"It moves," he muttered—"it moves. Now, if they'll only come quickly! if the old legatee'll only keep out of the way as I advised him!"

A grin, like a spasm of pain, twitched his face.

"Matilda, Matilda!" he murmured. "What a thorough-paced one you are! It exceeded my fondest expectations—really it did now."

He stopped abruptly, pricking his ears.

"Here they are!" he whispered.

"A gentleman, sir," announced the servant at the door.

Mr. Crowdie stared dumb-stricken. A wild gaunt figure bore down upon him—was addressing him. For the moment his presence of mind was become a desperately meagre quantity.

"Where is she?" demanded this really terrible apparition, glaring once about it, and again fixing the agent with its burning eyes.

"Mr. Latimer!—who do you mean? This is a complete surprise."

"Hasn't she returned, I say?"

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"Eh ?—Do you refer to Miss Brotherhood, sir ? Upon my word, now, I didn't know you had been asked to meet her."

"Has she returned ?"

"No, she hasn't."

The young priest's arms hung by his sides ; but the hands, the agent observed, were clinched and restless. In all this wreck of manhood there was no starved nerve, indeed, but, at this last, was griped, like the fists, to a desperate revolt against the abstinence it had imposed upon itself.

"Very well," he said (his voice came so repressed, that it was almost a whine). "I have something to say to you in the meantime."

"To me ? Oh, I don't think that can be the case, sir."

With the words, he felt himself seized by the shoulder in a clutch so strenuous that it fell on him like a blow. He even dropped under it a little, and had an inclination to whimper.

"You dog !" said Gerard—but in the same toneless voice : "you filthy procurer !"

He had a paper in his left hand, and he beat it down upon the other's chest.

"Read that !" he said—"or I'll crush it into your throat. Read ! do you hear ?"

Crowdie writhed. His face was like wet veal.

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"Let me go," he stuttered. "How—how dare you!"

"I dare?" said the priest. "Yes, anything—the gallows—hell, if it's true. Quick!"

"Why should I read it?"

"You'll know when you do."

"You hurt me, sir. It's impossible while you hold me like that."

Gerard slid his clutch to the wrist, and forced the paper into the hand he held. That trembled so that the wretched creature could hardly make out the lines he was bidden to. And this was the drift of them.

"If G. L. hasn't yet fathomed the reason why he was given his congé at G., he is advised by a *Well-wisher* to consult K. G., under whose protection J. B. is notoriously living, and who is finding the money (the reputed wealth of S. B. having proved a chimera) for J. B.'s preposterous adventure on the boards. This may be verified by reference to—(name *Crowdied* out), who acts as K. G.'s creature and decoy in his intrigues."

Crowdie read this through twice—the first time hurriedly, the second as composedly as his shaking hand and questing brain would permit. The good creature was cruelly harassed over this unexpected blocking of his plans. Great heaven! what were

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things coming to when rejected suitors assumed a right to police their inamoratas? He was so maddened in the menace of failure after all, that he positively for an instant dropped his face in the impulse to set his savage dog-teeth in the hand that held him. The fit passed, characteristically, in the act, and he affected only to be struggling for freedom. Then he came erect, and turned this way and that the paper he held.

"No more? Is that all?" he said, holding his voice steady with his teeth, as it were. He looked up, with quite a piously shocked expression, into the tortured face that threatened him.

"Anonymous!" he exclaimed, in a tone pregnant with marvel and rebuke. "May I ask how this reached you?"

"It was left at my rooms," said Gerard. "I thrust it unread into my pocket, and only thought of it after I had quitted the theatre. God, if I had read it when it came! I would have risen and cursed her from my place."

Mr. Crowdie had now calculated his own resources. The one urgency was time.

"Exactly," said he drily. "You would have cursed her from your place, and so served most accurately the purpose for which it was sent. Mr. Latimer—approachability in a minister of the church,

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by all means; but openness to the breath of detraction—oh, sir, sir! The anonymous letter! the common device of any jealous and malignant woman—as this is, I will swear it. Why, I am not ordained; I am of the world worldly; I cannot think to emulate you in the virtues of charity. Yet I would back my faith in another to triumph over the deadliest attacks of a hidden slanderer.”

Involuntarily, as it seemed, Gerard had relaxed his clutch. Now he put his hand in a confused way to his forehead. He opened his mouth as if to speak—gasped, and was silent.

“This, you say,” went on Crowdie, offering to return the letter as something beneath the very disdain of an honest man, “was left at your rooms *before* to-night’s performance. Why? Obviously to win you to the side of the houndish detractors of a most unhappy lady.”

Gerard’s face was like death.

“What of all that,” he whispered, “if it is true?”

“True, sir, and anonymous! But fortunately I am in a way to penetrate this dastardly disguise, and to identify the traducer with the organiser of to-night’s *claque*.”

“Who was it?”

“It was a woman. I will tell you her name, if you desire it.”

## Joan Brotherhood

"No ! Tell me it was a lie."

"Why, sir, it was the worst of lies—a half-truth given the burden of a whole one—your proper slanderer's method. Now listen, please, to the root truth that was used to colour the rest. Mr. Stephen, sir, at this date has no fortune left. He has dissipated it all. It was a ridiculously small legacy at the outset ; but his ignorance magnified it into something inexhaustible. Fearing to break the truth to Miss Brotherhood, he prevailed upon young Mr. Gatwick to advance him the money for this venture, the success of which he hoped would re-establish him in affluence."

He paused.

"Is that all ?" said Gerard faintly.

"All the truth, sir. The rest—the ingenious dovetailing by a person who chooses to consider herself Miss Brotherhood's rival——"

He stopped again. The young man was regarding him with lacklustre eyes—swaying even a little, as if relaxed from some intolerable strain.

"A rival !" he murmured thickly. "I don't understand. God—God forgive you if you are deceiving me !"

"Why should I deceive you ?" said Crowdie, watchful of him. "I trust, sir, a somewhat worldly life has not entirely deadened me to the softer



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emotions. I have been greatly touched, I really have, by your transparent devotion to—to—and can only regret that circumstances—Mr. Latimer, sir, you are not looking well. Let me call you a cab?"

"No," said Gerard, struggling with himself. "I will stop—ask her forgiveness."

"Sir," cried Crowdie, hurried and alarmed, "believe me, in her present state of agitation you would distress her beyond measure!"

Gerard gave a weak little foolish laugh.

"You don't know," he said. "Now—she will see and understand. Poor Joan! Nothing left? Poor girl!"

Suddenly he staggered, pulled himself erect, and made dizzily for the supper table. The agent, grinding his teeth, stood regarding him.

"Give me wine," said the young man, half articulately. "It's a medicine to those that abstain. I'm light-headed, I think. I've eaten nothing all day. I——"

He seized a champagne bottle at hazard. The agent, in desperate inspiration, rushed and caught it from his hand.

"The very thing!" he cried. "It will make a man of you. Wait while I open it."

He bore the bottle hastily to the sideboard—snatched up a knife.

"Stop!" he thought. "A *soupeçon* of brandy for

## Joan Brotherhood

a basis." (He poured some stealthily into a tumbler from a decanter). "Nothing to eat all day! Light-headed and an abstainer! It ought to do the business, if he'll swallow it. It's a last chance any way."

He knocked off the head of the bottle with the knife-back. The foam spurted out and made a hissing pool on the floor. But he was careful in his hurry not to let the tumbler overflow.

"Here," he said, hastening back, bottle and glass in his hands. "Put that down at a gulp."

Gerard took the tumbler, almost blindly, it seemed. He was palpably in an extreme of nervous exhaustion. His body bowed at the shoulders; his eyes were glazed. He sipped the stinging mixture.

"What's this!" he muttered stupidly. "It's horribly strong."

"It's you that are weak," urged Crowdie, almost sick with suspense. "Put it down, man, put it down—to the confusion of Miss Brotherhood's enemies!"

The victim smiled vacuously.

"A good toast," he said. "Here, then, with all my heart!"

He swallowed the draught at a breath—choked in a strangled way—dropped the glass with a crash—clapped his hand down on the table, and stood panting and swaying.

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"Hold on!" he gasped. "I'm all swimming—  
It's——"

He swung round, bringing his other hand to his support, his elbows crooking. Crowdie, scared by the immediate success of his own villainy, whipped a strenuous arm about him.

"You must lie down," he cried, in a panic. "Good Lord, if I can't get him away now! What d'ye say?" (The drunken man's speech had mumbled off into mere drivel.) "Try anyhow to get to the sofa. I'm helping you. Now, then!"

By hook or by crook, supporting, dragging, persuading, he got him to the lounge in the window recess, and saw him fall upon it, a drugged and motionless heap. Then he stepped back, fighting for his breath, while he tried to pull tie and collar and coat into some decency of order. It might at least be said for Mr. Gleeson-Crowdie that he served, whomsoever it was he served, with a devotion that was heroic.

"Oh, you pretty ghost!" breathed he, shaking his head rebukingly at the fallen man: "for how long are you laid now? For the next hour or two, I should think, not the last trump'd raise you. If only they'll hurry, and daddy keep out of the way!"

He pulled the curtains softly across the recess, shutting from sight the senseless figure, and, turning

## Joan Brotherhood

to the lighted room, pondered, with his nervous fingers on his chin.

"O Matilda, Matilda!" he was thinking. "No woman so willing to have her cake and eat it. To ruin one with another, and then manœuvre to rob each of the fruits! I never foresaw that, when I ventured to post you certain facts. You're magnificent, Matilda; but I fancy—I fancy we'll out-general you yet."

He caught sight of his figure in a mirror and started.

"Good Lord!" he muttered. "Here's tell-tales. I'm not fit to be seen. I must run upstairs and change. I shall be down in time to give Kempton the tip."

He grinned round at the closed curtains and went softly from the room.

## CHAPTER IV

WHEN, to the last clash of its cymbals, a theatre's mimic world is shattered, its fragments—as represented by lighted cabs and broughams and trains—flame abroad, rushing to every point of the compass. To what silences, what memories, what cooling emotions and dreary contrasts of dulness? Well, my masters, the spark had a glorious time while it contributed to the fire; but the fire had to come to ashes if it would burn.

A meteoric cab, rushing from a little broken world in Soho, spent its force and came to before the door of a house in Half-Moon Street. In the falling sleet, an expiring smoke seemed to rise from it—a smoke that wreathed itself up the steps in the ghostly form of a woman—white-clad, white-faced—and drifted into the hall. Something in black (it might have prefigured extinction) lingered a moment to pay the reckoning, and in a moment was also gone.

To what dreary contrasts? Up there, in the gala-room that was to have echoed to happy congratulations, that all the evening had been scouring with

## Joan Brotherhood

light its hundreds of glass facets, that they might the more radiantly reflect and multiply a jubilant company—lay hope flung aside and darkened. A ruin—wild, beautiful, disordered—prone in a chair, with its face buried in its arms.

Kempton filled out a glass of wine, carried it to her and touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"Drink this," he said quietly.

She shivered, and shook her head.

"Do you hear?" he said, without raising his voice.

"Is it something to make me sleep and forget? If only I could die in my sleep."

His mouth set obstinately. He did not offer the glass again; but he held it still in his left hand, while with his right he leaned upon the chair back, looking determinedly down upon her.

"I've no likin' for these heroics," he said; "and I've no belief in them. Here's a check—nothin' more; and you accept it for a defeat."

"Only that?" she said, with a little gasp of mockery. "I thought it was the world shrieking at me to know my place and keep it. But they needn't have yelled so. I wasn't deaf and blind with vanity, as they seemed to think."

She shuddered and buried her face deeper.

"Oh, the voices, the voices!" she moaned. "Shall I ever be able to forget them!"

## Joan Brotherhood

Kempton breathed quickly ; leaned lower over her.

"If you go far enough away, Joan. If you take the remedy I offer, and leave your troubles behind the sea."

She rose staggering to her feet. She regarded him with horrified eyes, putting the hair back from her face. Suddenly she made a stumbling step forward.

"Daddy," she said. "Let me go to daddy. Why doesn't he come ? I know he loves me still in spite of it all."

She was blind, it seemed. She stopped aimlessly in a moment. Kempton put the glass composedly down on the table, took a swift step, and caught her in his arms. She struggled feebly—and fell passive.

"Why do you ask for him ?" he said. "Has he proved himself so much your friend ? He's a truer estimate of his own services, you see ; or he wouldn't keep out of the way."

She broke from him, and flung herself down in the chair again.

"Oh, my heart, my heart !" she cried very desolately. "There is no one left to me. I have driven them all away—" and a passion of tears overcame her.

He let her cry herself out. Her sobs were so rending that the white flowers she wore in her bosom were loosened, and fell like flakes, petal by petal, as if her heart were freezing. It may have been ; for presently the convulsion was stilled, and she sat up,

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a cold white ghost of herself. At that he took her hand, and felt it lie frozen in his.

"My poor little girl," he said : "you are like ice."

"Yes," she answered. "I am like ice."

He dwelt on her tone a moment—frowned—bit his lip, and dropped her hand again. He had not hesitated, it will be seen, to presume upon her indebtedness to him. She never questioned his right to do so. Only—since he had made his offer—she had seemed tacitly to repel any approaches on his part that implied other than a business understanding between them. It had been as if she had signed a reckless bond, with full confidence in her own power to redeem it ; it was now as if, disillusioned as to her power, she was prepared to meet her liabilities.

But love was not in the bond. The proud, tough young tyrant knew it ; and sometimes he felt as if he hated her for the knowledge. Why, he could always buy in the market. He had not sinned, manœuvred, paid the piper ruinously for possession of a mechanical doll. Surging with passion, he must affect a passionless part ; until, through accumulations of desire, he longed only to get her into his power, that he might wrench love out of her fear of him, if nothing else would serve.

He reached, and held out to her once more, the glass of wine.



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"Drink that down."

She obeyed now, without a murmur.

"Ah!" she sighed: "but I am past melting."

Nevertheless a spot of colour came to her cheeks.

"What do you want me to do?" she said.

"Will you rest awhile, and try again?"

She shook her head.

"It was an organised plot, by your enemies."

"Ah! What have I done to deserve enemies?"

"No beautiful woman is without 'em. It proves nothing."

"Proves? Oh, it proves everything—my insignificance, my selfishness, my blind, blind vanity. I know myself at last, and how I have made the bed that I must lie on."

His eyes burned. He fell on his knees beside her and imprisoned her in his arms.

"Poor, poor little woman!" he said huskily. "It isn't true; but how am I to complain if it's the means of bringin' us together?"

She was quite quiet and passive to his caresses.

"Yes, I know," she said. "My loss is your profit, I suppose."

"You jade," he whispered, drawing back a moment. "You dare to mean I had a hand in this?"

"No," she said, in a weary, dead voice. "It

## Joan Brotherhood

doesn't all matter. What do you want me to do ? I have lost and I must pay."

He clasped her again, hard and eager.

"You can't go back——"

"Oh, if I could—if I could!"

"You can't, I say. Think of the mockery and the sneers. Think of yourself, with your new knowledge of the best that money can bring, returned to that beastly poverty—pointed at by the wives for an example—justifyin' the old man in his treatment of you by makin' yourself dependent on him again."

She started as if to rise ; and sank back, moving her head from side to side, like a poor trapped soul in delirium.

"I can kill myself," she muttered.

"Nonsense !" he exclaimed. "Don't let's have any more of that. Kill yourself ? now ? and leave the last word with your enemies. Show 'em you don't care, rather, and mean to enjoy life for all they're so devilish set to spoil it for you. You owe it to yourself, mind—to—to the amulet, you know—to prove you ain't responsible for your conduct to the many-headed."

"Ah !" she sighed. "That delusion is gone with the rest. Could I behave so—let you speak to me so—if I were a real lady ?"

He laughed, and checked himself. But she only sighed again heart-brokenly.

## Joan Brotherhood

"What do you want me to do?" she repeated monotonously.

He muttered some breathless wickedness about marriage.

"No, no!" she cried, to his amazement. "Not that!"

He looked, quite dumbfounded for the moment, into her face.

"I mean what I say," she cried passionately. "I—for all the evil and suffering I have caused—my punishment—to escape it—not that way; it is impossible."

Her breath caught. She crushed her hand to her forehead, then recovered herself, and went on stonily as before—

"I don't delude myself any longer—as to the past, or your object. I was blind because I wished to be. But I know what I have done; and that the only way to repair it now is by tearing my wretched self out of the lives I have so ruined—is by making them in—in mercy, try to forget me. I have lost, and I must pay the penalty. There is no other way."

"You owe me something," he muttered, hardly conscious of what he said.

"Don't I know it, and show that I know it?" she answered dully. "I pay you the only way I can. I give myself in hostage for the old man's bond."

## Joan Brotherhood

When I have it, and have torn it up, you will have done as you like by me. You will have had your pound of flesh, and he—(God bless him!—I can say it now)—will be quit of his debt to you and of me together.”

She made as if to rise; but he held her back. Her eyes had a far-away look of hopelessness in them, as if they were strained upon some slowly receding figure that had passed beyond recall.

“You’ll observe,” he said quietly, “that the bond wasn’t alluded to by me. If I hold it, it’s only to strengthen my case, that don’t seem of much value on its own merits. Give me your word it’ll make no difference, and I’ll fetch and hand it over to you now.”

She did not answer.

“Ah, you see!” he said, “you can’t trust yourself to make the promise. And for me it would mean madness to risk losin’ you——”

And his passion mastered him. He seized and claimed her, holding her against his face and his groping lips.

“I can’t brave the thought of givin’ you up, Joan,” he cried. “You must come with me—away, anywhere; only we two must be together. We’ll go to Italy—to some place where you can win forgetfulness of all this; where you can rest, and recover, and fit yourself against the next attempt.”

She shook her head, though she seemed to listen.



## Joan Brotherhood

"Ah! but you shall, my own beautiful witch," he said. "D'you think this conspiracy has shaken my faith in you? Joan, I'm ready to back my belief with everything I possess—to stake my chance of ever winnin' a smile from you on it."

Even his heat and fervour could find no sympathetic spark in her to feed on. When he would allow her, she pushed him gently away, and got to her feet—as he did.

"I understand the value of your faith in me," she said. "Are those the conditions? Very well, I will come with you."

He fell back a pace or two. His eyes were full of gloom, as he stood, without a word, watching her. Had he one rare thought of nobility even then—a thought to rend the bond before her face, and to say: "Perish the obligation!—Give yourself to me of your own free will, or not at all!" Good God! this childish loveliness of hers! He had never known it so tear him this way and that as now in its pathetic abandonment to his cruelty.

He turned away, grinding his teeth. Something—the mere shadow of a sound—reached his ear. He glanced towards the door. It had moved stealthily on its hinges. The white face of the agent looked into his. He felt as if he had been caught in the very act of virtue. He smiled, and then frowned.

## Joan Brotherhood

In the same moment the expression that had penetrated him flashed into one of scare and terror ; and the man was in the room—was clutching him by the arm.

“Good Lord !” he whispered — “Mr. Kempton, sir—stop her !”

It was too late. With a cry of “Air ! I am suffocating—I want air !” the girl had tottered towards the window, and had torn apart the curtains. And there she stood stricken to stone.

A dreadful silence befell.

Suddenly Kempton turned on his creature, with a face like a devil’s.

“How did he come ? Did you know he was there ?” he said, with a mad scorn of secrecy in his voice.

“Sir—sir !” whimpered the agent, in an ecstasy of abjectness : “I tried to get rid of him—I did my utmost. But he was in a deplorable state of intoxication. I must confess it really. He insisted upon stopping. I hoped to be able to warn you—I—I never dreamed——”

Kempton flung him aside.

“A—a melancholy sight, Miss Brotherhood !” stuttered this misused servant, even as he pirouetted on his heel.

She seemed to hear nothing—to be oblivious of all but the terror of that one vision.

## Joan Brotherhood

"Gerard!" she whispered, in a tone so piteous and desolate it might have wrung tears from a god.

"How pale and thin you are," she said. "Why, even you are changed to me. Did you mean to come and comfort me? And after I had brought you to this!"

She fell on her knees by his side.

"If I go altogether out of your life, Gerard, will you try and be your old self again? Will you try and forget me? I am so unworthy—so unworthy, dear. Hush! I mustn't wake him."

Kempton took an eager step forward—seized her hand, as if to help her to her feet. The sick man moaned and stirred. His eyes opened, without speculation—and closed again. Joan tore away her hand, and clasped it to the other in an agony of entreaty.

"Gerard! Gerard!" she cried—and the tears were running down her cheeks—"won't you wake and save me—your poor Joan, Gerard? I am kneeling to you—praying to you. Listen to me, Gerard! Don't you hear me?"

She sank back a moment, abandoning herself to despair; then essayed once more, writhing her arms about him, but even then not touching him.

"Gerard! won't you save me—you, who have never refused me the least little thing?"

## Joan Brotherhood

"I'm afraid—I'm really afraid," said Mr. Crowdie, gently but quite distinctly, "that the gentleman's beyond understanding anything at present. Brandy and champagne, you see——"

"Gerard!" sobbed the girl—"before it is too late!"

Kempton stooped and, with savage resolution, dragged her to her feet.

"Him or the bond," he said. "Make up your mind."

She looked into his face, wildly and hopelessly; she wrestled herself round, choking and crying.

"Gerard!" she said, "I can't help myself. It was only you that could help me; and you lie there without speaking. I've deserved it all—that you should leave me to my fate—But the punishment! —Gerard! Gerard! Am I to go?"

The face might have been a waxen mask.

"I think," murmured a rasping voice: "that the reverend gentleman would hardly consider himself well suited with a certain lady, after what's passed."

She cried out as if she had been struck; and threw her head back and groped with her hands.

"Take me away," she said in a strangled whisper—"lest he should wake and see me."

"How about that, Matilda!" murmured the agent, as he stood alone, looking down upon the unconscious figure.



## Joan Brotherhood

"Good Lord!" he said, wriggling his shoulders—"I feel for all the world as if I had been trying conclusions with Jacob's angel. And now, for the sake of all parties—including myself—I'd better disappear for a bit."

The drunken man slept on—for long like a dead thing; but presently he began to dream. Something had detached itself from a vast wreck of gloom—a livid blur, like a phantom dawn on a blind. And, like the dawn, it waxed; only it was never stationary. It sped before him, and he must follow—over an uncouth and monstrous waste. He was choked with anguish to overtake and halt it; yet it kept its distance, strive as he would. The ground was honeycombed with holes. He must wrench a foot from one at every step. And the blur took shape and substance—till it was Joan, flitting before him in her white night-gown—going monotonously forward with a set purpose.

He knew what that was—even before the waste ended at a dreary sky-line—the edge of a swimming precipice. She had paused there; and he had stumbled to within touch of her. But he could not touch her or speak. His very soul writhed in agony, dumbly imploring her to turn—to look upon him—to know him at last—at least to read

## Joan Brotherhood

the passionate forgiveness in his eyes before she cast herself down.

She leaned forward—lower, lower. He could never see her face; but he could see that it looked down upon something—some dead little thing that had risen from the depths of the reeling vortex beneath. It was the body of a tiny child—drowned in the waves of eternal mist—floating half submerged as it had been cast up.

Suddenly she staggered, and threw her arms above her head. A hideous whine, like a dog's bay, rose from the gulf——

In the same instant he could move. With an answering mad cry he leapt the intervening space——

And he was standing up in a blaze of light—and before him stood Stephen Brotherhood, with bloodless face and staring eyes.

Did they both know all the truth in that moment?

"My God!" said the old man: "it isn't what I fear! You here! and stand by and let it be! Where is she? Speak out, man! Where's she gone?"

"Gone!" whispered the other.

"Ay—so I'm told. If it's true—that dog—I was advised to keep out of the way; and I did till my heart of pity wouldn't let me rest."

"Gone!" whispered Gerard again, in a dead voice.

## Joan Brotherhood

Stephen lifted his hands pitifully.

"In God's name—in God's name give them the lie, sir. They tell me she drove off with Mr. Gatwick an hour ago—that she was going across the sea with him. It isn't true—my Joan, my bird!"

He staggered as Gerard leapt upon him and crashed a hand down on his arm.

"True!" cried the priest dreadfully: "don't you know it is? Isn't it what you schemed for, and sold your soul for?—when you accepted the price of her shame——"

He flung the old man from him without mercy.

"Damn you all!" he shrieked—"a conspiracy of devils! If I had guessed, when he stood before me with that sick lying face——"

He broke off, shrinking on the moment, it seemed, before some vision of terror.

"Why—wasn't she here?" he gasped. "Didn't she cry to me to save her—just now, on the edge of the pit?"

Then fury took him once more.

"*Your* Joan!" he cried. "*Mine*, you old hound and dotard—mine, do you hear? She was my wife, that you've sold! Do you understand—my wife!"

Stephen clapped his hand to his forehead.

"Dear Christ, I'm suffering!" he whined.

Gerard drove upon him again.

## Joan Brotherhood

"You want reviving—disillusioning! they keep the stuff here!"

He dragged and tore his captive to the table. He released him to snatch the bottle from which he had himself drunk his damnation. The glass cut his hand. He sprayed the red abroad, throwing up his arm in a whirl of foam.

"My God! the room's all bloody!" panted Stephen.

"Drink!" shrieked Gerard—"drink in blood for the dog you are!"

Stephen gave a sudden thin cry—tore at his neckcloth—and went down with a splintering thud amongst the plates and glasses on the table.

## PART IV

### CHAPTER I

ALL during this month of September Joan was content to sit in the sun, and watch the lizards sprawling and whisking about the walls. There was one particular spot—on the Pompeian road, just outside Castellamare—where she would camp for hours, conscious of little but the queer animal life about her—of the butterflies and clumsy beetles; of the shrill bubbling of hedge-crickets; of the scrutiny of the lizards themselves, as they clambered with ineffective legs, and lay to regard her with hard clean eyes and throats pumping like slow arteries. She felt small interest in the great funnel of the crater across the valley. Trailing clouds of steam behind it, it seemed to typify the onward rush of the world; and her concern was for the infinitely little conservatisms of life. Such as a child would love withal. She had a strange and pathetic curiosity to put herself *en rapport* with the weëst of created things—to qualify herself for companionship with

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the prettiest ignorances. That simple ambition had come to supersede any that had once dominated her.

To know herself the object of an inquisitive regard that was altogether foreign in its essence to the notoriety she had once hungered to achieve, humiliated and distressed her. She contrived always to evade it—to be alone. With a dawning realisation of what a particular secret meant to her, she instinctively shrank more and more from the affectation of admitting any claim upon her confidence. This secret, indeed, that she had borne along with her, unwitting of it, in her downfall, she must—when conscious by-and-by of its possession—strenuously hold from him, of all, whose present property she was. In the shadow of a new and sacred knowledge she sat apart from the world—cloisteral, remote ; feeling the very passion, that had brought her to her present pass, a nameless vulgarity.

Yet, the mere knowledge itself was peace after tempest—was Heaven's most pitying warrant of forgiveness. Basking in it, she had dear day-dreams ; of what could be, and what could be—not for her own sake, but another's. Always in them she herself stood aside,—patient, unforgiven, but tolerated for what she brought, and content to be only tolerated.

And in the meantime (seeing Heaven, for her sins, exacted it of her, making her submission to it a con-

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dition of its pardon) she must suffer the familiar she had wantonly burdened herself withal—must endure rough handling of her secret, until such time as that should inevitably proclaim itself, to effect the inevitable separation she foresaw and desired.

And, what then? Well, Heaven would not give and withhold. The rest was Heaven's.

The premonitory symptoms of the rupture she presurmised showed themselves surely enough in a gradual alteration of Kempton's attitude towards her. Over that she made no protest, thankful only that—whether from pride or disenchantment—he should forbear to invite her confidences. She had proved a dreary companion to him in truth; and now, feeling the ties that bound them slacken, she turned her dulness to a fuller account. Once, indeed, she had feared him. She did so no longer, though her heart was like water in the thought of that final struggle that was to liberate or destroy her. But he himself must rend the bonds, or her self-renunciation would be meaningless.

Here, in this old Italian coast town—whither they had come, loitering southwards with the maturing summer—he wearied of her at last, it seemed. There had been earlier absences of his—day-long, week-long. Now he withdrew himself for near a month; and, when he returned, she saw, upon their first meeting,

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how a certain distrust of her, that he had carried away with him, was sprung suddenly into such acuteness as made her shudder for her secret. But, even then, her only terror was lest an indefinite postponement of the crisis should seem to justify him in fathering it.

He took her away, vouchsafing no reason, from the lizard-haunted sunshine—northwards as far as Paris. Perhaps—conscious, with her, of some amorphous foreshadowing of the end—he had an instinct of mercy to leave her stranded within sight of home. Perhaps he was only feverishly restless to have events precipitate themselves. Whatever were his sentiments, whatever was his object, however, he kept all to himself. He housed her becomingly to his station; and hardly had he done so, when she was taken alarmingly ill. He called in an English doctor.

“Well?” said he, after the interview had taken place. “Is it imminent, or am I a fool?”

“You may stake your wisdom on the event,” said the doctor. “It may occur at any moment.”

“Just a normal case?”

“No. I wouldn’t have you apprehend complications. It is a seven months’ affair, that is all.”

“Oh! that’s all, is it?” said Kempton. “And why not a four months’ affair?”

The doctor treated this as a joke.





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"I'd make my preparations without delay, if I were you," said he. "Don't fluster yourself. I'll send on a nurse this afternoon."

That night Joan was on the rack, and yielded her secret under torture. Kempton was not present to receive the report. He had betaken himself—as that creature which, out of all the world, he most dreaded for the time being—to other distractions.

But, four days later, he stood by her bedside. He had come so silently that she, deeply occupied, was unconscious for the moment of his presence. She was propped up on pillows. The blood had sunk remoter from her always colourless face. Her hair sagged down upon the open neck of her smock. She cherished a little head to her breast, and laughed to see the tiny clinging mouth even prodigally wasteful of the life she had accumulated for its sake.

She had a ring in her hand—a plain gold one; and she would crown the child's head with it, and then lift it to her own lips and kiss it stealthily. It was in the act that she became aware of the figure beside the bed. Then she clutched both of her possessions frantically to her heart, and prepared herself, with a shuddering defiance, for the struggle.

"Whose brat is that?" said Kempton, in a measured voice.

## Joan Brotherhood

"Mine," she whispered back, haunting him with her eyes.

"Ah!" he said—the dog. "But you'll hardly, with your record, claim to be immaculate. It's somebody else's too, I suppose?"

"Not yours," she said fearfully—"not yours."

He gave a little neigh of a laugh.

"You don't say so! Whose, then? Or can't you tell?"

She only crouched, seeking more closely to shroud and envelop her property. The pressure brought forth a wail, which she hushed in a panic voice. He felt her terror, and, if he misinterpreted, he none the less exulted in it.

"You've over-reached yourself a trifle, haven't you?" said he. "If Fate hadn't foreclosed, I should have been called upon to father this monkey, should I?"

"No," she whispered.

"You dare, you trollop!" he cried.

("Ho, là, là! doucement, monsieur. Il ne faut pas agiter madame!") put in the comfortable fat *commère*, who was heating something in a saucepan at the fire.)

Kempton laughed again.

"It's your calculations more than you that's upset," said he. "If it hadn't been for this—I don't know—you might have carried it off with me in

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another two months or so. Now you'll hardly expect me to go on playin' cat's-paw, will you?"

She met his eyes with a dumb watchfulness. There was no brutal innuendo he uttered, but she joyously accepted it—while it seared her soul—as confirming his repudiation of a title she had had a mad fear he would make it his policy to claim. He might heap insult on her head; he had warrant for doing so. And she would bear and bear for the sake of what she had borne, if only he would arrogate to himself no right to a share in the burden. It was proof of her childishness that she could agitate herself over a contingency so inconceivable. But, indeed, young mothers under ordinary conditions are jealous of the very midges that covet their fubby-fleshed mascots.

"Supposin' we get its daddy to come and pull his own chestnuts out of the fire!" said the young animal. "Shall I take him a message from you? Who is he? Had your father a shop-boy? By God!" he cried, on a note of inspiration, "I never thought of the parson. I believe it's the parson."

Some answering spasm on the face he so pitilessly searched with his eyes, set him crowing like an evil spirit.

"These clergymen!" he said, between his teeth. "To think that all the time——"

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She interrupted him, then, in a voice of terror.

"Don't speak it! He is good and holy. God will curse you if you do. Before ever I met you—I must say it now—we two—he and I—were married."

He had not foreseen this. For a minute he stared at her quite speechless. His face during that minute was a map of inhuman possessions all drawn in black and white. Then he uttered a deep sigh, and turned abruptly on his heel. She knew she should never see him again.

"Kempton!" she cried.

He paused and twisted about.

"You have been generous to me—" she began.

He turned again, without a word; strode to the door, and was gone.

And she rose, as if from strangling waters, and shook the hair from her face.

The good nurse hurried to the bedside, a steaming cup in her hand, fear in her heart. She had only comprehended the language of tone and expression, and, these considered, expected to find her charge prostrate and in despair. She found her with a face of quiet transport, slipping a gold ring upon one after another of the little creased fingers that were sprawled upon her bosom.

And so, for yet another week or more, Joan lay in Avalon, and took no stock of the hours. She



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had never in all her life as yet, you see, been under the necessity of thinking for herself.

One morning there was a little commotion outside her door ; and presently the nurse entered truculent and hot-faced. What was the matter, Joan asked her, in her sweet broken French. She would only respond with evasion, until indignation, acting upon her national garrulousness, got the better of her reserve. It was Madame, to be sure—that extremely strict *mattresse*—who was affecting a concern (now that it was no longer to her profit to shut her eyes) for the fair repute of her house. She had never had an *affaire* herself, this Madame, oh no ! In fact, she did well to plume herself upon a virtue that was a necessity. It was not her fault, indeed, if she was unapproachable. It testified to a certain standard of taste amongst the gentlemen, rather than to her own intentional aloofness. One must have a certain attractiveness to attract ; and when, in addition to natural deformities, a covetous disposition asserted itself——

Joan, gathering mental nettles of this waste of words, saw in a moment the desolation of her fools' paradise. She was deserted, alone, anathema—and the rent was called for.

She did not despair at once. She had her mascot. But she must commit herself — without further

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begging the question—to the retributive pilgrimage the course of which had been long foreshadowed in her soul. Over a reeling gulf, to a little old shop in a quiet court — and there was her first stage. She hoped and prayed she should find him, her own daddy, there—not forgetting her, but retired to his peaceful pursuits, the past softened, and mercy in his heart. At least, if he had not returned, she could hear of him. And afterwards—and beyond? She strained the little life to her breast, and dared not let her thoughts travel further.

Now, for the present? It was in proof of her wide waking that a quick association of ideas overcame her.

“*Ma chère*—my nurse,” she said, with a little gasp : “and how about my debt to you?”

“Hold your tongue, little fool!” said the woman gruffly.

Joan ran to her (she was out of bed now), and kissed and cried over her. Then she took stock of her possessions. Her purse was near empty; but she had various little trinkets given her by Kempton.

“You must turn these all into money for me,” she said.

The other protested. She would not. The pretty jewels. Virtue was its own reward. Let Madame grow fat on it.

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"But you have no virtue," said Joan. "You are hard and cruel, and so you must be paid."

Then she assured her that she was only joking; and cried over her again.

"Stop, while I eat you," said the woman.

In the end Joan prevailed, because she threatened to work herself into a fever if she were denied.

"At least, let me only pledge them?" said mother nurse.

But to that Joan would not listen.

"I am a woman of business," she said. "I know the ropes. There is no comparison between selling and 'popping.' Besides, think what a jest it will be to pay monsieur's debts with monsieur's presents."

The other did not see the jest.

"You will regret it some day," she said.

Joan shook her head merrily.

"If you only knew the relief it is to me to get rid of them so honourably!"

The woman went away grumbling.

That evening Joan, during nurse's absence abroad, had an interview with Madame. The lady was quite frigidly civil. She regretted; she had nothing but blame for monsieur's unaccountable behaviour; but there were other applicants for the rooms, and she could not afford—

Joan stopped her, and paid her. It was perfectly

## Joan Brotherhood

correct, she said, and Madame need be under no apprehensions. She was resolved to leave the house at once.

She had said nothing of her intentions to her good friend; but she had sat down, when alone, and had written her a letter—full of love and heartfelt thanks—in which she made disposition to her of every atom of personal property she was leaving behind—including all the contents of her purse, save a remnant which she kept for her own immediate needs. Then, dressed in her simplest, she took the mascot, and went forth into the dusk.

She had not realised how weak she was, nor had she taken consideration of the weather. It was gusty and wet. The streets were dismally empty. The pavements hissed under the downpour, as if the rain were penetrating to the very reflections of their lamps. Paris was in the only sort of mourning that ever holds there for a longer interval than that between two cafés. She cuddled her baby in her cloak (what were present appearances to that vision of home towards which she had set her face!) and setting her teeth to the wind, struggled forward. Perhaps the certain Quixotism of having left herself only enough for bare necessities may have occurred to her. Partly, no doubt, she had underrated the measure of her needs. But beyond this, she had





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wished so desperately to sweep her soul clean of the wages of her service. Their very dust must not remain to soil the palm of this blessed little advocate of her repentance. Oh, home—dear home! Only to reach it!

Somehow she got to the station. It was not, in truth, far off; and she had wormed the direction out of her unwitting nurse; yet she was exhausted when she gained it. She thought that, for both their sakes, she had better eat and drink; but it occurred to her first to book her passage. She asked for a through ticket by way of Havre to Southampton. When she had paid for it, at the cheapest rate, she found to her horror that she had only a few sous left, enough for the purchase of a glass of milk and two or three biscuits, and that was all. So she invested bravely the last of her wages, and then, feeling strong as a lion, set herself patiently to tarry out the long hours before the starting of the boat train. She was in a state of strange exaltation—like one who, bearing good news, puts, in imagination, “a girdle round about the earth in forty minutes.” What are three hundred miles to a homing bird but three hundred anticipations of welcome? It was only when she ran away that the Channel had seemed Acheron.

The mascot woke and wailed. She bore it remote, and took the short way to quiet it. She was rejoiced

## Joan Brotherhood

to find that so far, at least, it had no complaint to bring against her for parsimony.

Presently she was on her way, committed at last to a purely mechanical issue. For the whole journey she was alone. The rhythmical thick clack and boom of the close-shut carriage got into her brain, and claimed her for part of its scheme for all eternity. She had a nightmare struggle over and over again to resist this commandeering of her faculties; and still she would find herself sinking apathetic under its compelling. Then she would rise, and walk unsteadily to and fro, whispering and moaning, seeking sanity in her nervous frenzy of the very fretful crying of the child.

The stations were her chief consolation. Whether the train bore through these, ploughing up a double ridge of lights in its thundering rush, or took breath, restless and panting, at rain-washed platforms, to the accompaniment of a little scurrying and banging of doors, they were always periodic earnestnesses of hope—tokens of the colonisation of chaos. Yet, for all the reassurance they conveyed—for all her determination to rest reassured, they were no sooner distanced than the scheme began to claim her for its own once more—stealthily at first, but soon forcing her to adapt her whole being to its diabolical pulsation.

At last the torture reacted upon itself. She sank into a sort of lethargy, to which the child and its



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grieving were the only quick and vivid appeals. Henceforth, instructed by the engine, her movements, her speech, were become mechanical.

Sometime—she did not know when, or how it came about—there was a realisation of change—a sensation of drenched salt air, and of a numbness like that that veils the memory of bodily torment—a vision of running lights, and of a great funnel that purred and rubbed itself sleepily up and down against a black curtain of sky. Then, by-and-by, she had exchanged one sort of compartment for another. The sound of water was outside here too; but it was water moving in a solemn resistless body, not flinging itself in broken volleys upon glass. Moreover, she was no longer alone. Other women—a half-dozen—were her neighbours; but one and all so prostrate and absorbed in their own troubles as to be incapable of a sympathy they might otherwise have inclined to. As it was, poor bodies, they had only aching resentment to show against the mascot when it woke and was bitterly querulous.

Now the paddles, like the “Mills of God,” ground dawn slowly out of the sea; and, when the day was full, came Joan to Southampton. And thence, picking her way amazedly through the web of dock-lines that illustrated the shining tangle in her soul, she turned herself to the last stage of her journey.

## Joan Brotherhood

THERE were two daggled crows up a tree—  
Heigho !  
They were as wet as wet could be,  
Down by the greenwood side, O.  
Says she : " Shall you and I forgather  
Yet once more when the spring comes, father ?  
Heigho ! " says she.

Below sat a lady sore distrest—  
Heigho !  
She held a sick child unto her breast,  
Down by the greenwood side, O.  
And still as she held, she made her moan :  
" Boy sweet baby, don't leave me alone !  
Heigho ! " said she.

He was putting an edge to his bill—  
Heigho !  
She " dressed " up to him, coaxing still,  
Down by the greenwood side, O.  
" Blackguard, dear," of a sudden said she :  
" What became of our fledglings three ?  
Heigho ! " said she.

He flickered his wings, his beak he clapped—  
Heigho !  
" One he was shot, and one was trapped  
Down by the greenwood side, O.  
And the third I killed and picked her brain.  
So you'd have us to mate in the spring again,  
Heh, crow ? " said he.

## Joan Brotherhood

He cocked an eye at the wife below—

Heigho !

"Whom God hath joined—eh ! how does it go ?"

Said he, with a rascal leer, O.

"Nothing could better bring us joy—

Unless 'twere a collop o' baby boy?

Heh, crow?" said he.

She turned from him, with a pensive cluck—

Heigho !

"Blackguard,"—she said—and there she stuck,

Down by the greenwood side, O.

He paused in his task, with sideling head :

"Well, what's the matter with you ?" he said :

"Heh—heh?" said he.

"I wish," she began—and stopped again—

Heigho !

"Out with it, madam, and make it plain !"

Says he, with a sooty scowl, O.

"Only," she answered—"I'm so bereft—

Our one wee henny—you might have left—

That's all," said she.

She edged to his side, with a croak and quake—

Heigho !

"Blackguard," she said, "for the poor chick's sake

Shan't we forego this meal, O ?"

He withered her then with a single look :—

"*J'ou* for a mate again, you rook !

Good-bye !" said he.

## CHAPTER II

"FOUR miles to Totton ; thence round by the bend of the water, another twelve to Frimlington—sixteen in all." Could she do it?—sixteen miles of slush and ceaseless rain, and her love-wearied arms !

"You take my advice, missus, and cross in the boat to Hythe," said her informant. "There'll be one in an hour or two ; and the distance from there ain't—no, not two-thirds of the other."

She thanked him, and moved on, her mind in a whirl. Her utter penury had long whispered to her of a last resource, to which she had as long struggled to close her ears. The ring, with which she had crowned baby—was it not his patent of legitimacy?—was it not the link between him and her, to part with which would be to justify some monstrous authority in severing them as unfit companions for one another ? His patent ! Ah, and if when the appeal came to be made it were not in evidence ? Knowing how she had lied to *him*, would *he*, without it, admit the least claim upon him now ?

The little gold band assumed an unearthly signifi-

## Joan Brotherhood

cance in her over-tried brain. It was instinct with a talismanic power akin to Giglio's in the fairy tale. So long as she stuck to it, all would go well. So she started, poor fevered thing, at every plausible shadow that pursued her.

After all, it was but a summer's walk; and her soul, at least, was April. Sixteen miles, to spring thoughts! This at last was a holiday jaunt. She had nothing to apprehend from it physically but a grateful weariness.

Some stevedores, drinking hot coffee at a stall, hailed to her to come and join them.

"I have no money," she said, lingering.

"Put the bloomin' kid up the spout!" cried one of them boisterously.

She read a design upon her talisman even in this good-humoured banter, and hurried on her way, unregarding the shout to "come along, and not be a fool!" that pursued her. She never stopped till she was well clear of the town and its frowsy suburbs; and then she slunk under the lee of a friendly hedge, and making a tent of her cloak, prepared her poor junket of motherhood. Suddenly a hitherto unrealised terror of herself as the profferer of a Barmecide feast assailed her. She caught up the mascot. He had long fallen inert, and he moaned and whimpered a little over his strenuous handling.

## Joan Brotherhood

But he allowed himself to be persuaded by-and-by ; and she, dwelling upon him in trepidation, felt the tears scald her eyes to learn she had not played the false dam to him.

He dropped away all too soon ; but it was enough for her to claim a respite for her ring. And so she kissed it, as it hung by a ribbon from her neck, and rose, and went on her road exultant.

Love and hope and fear so drove or beguiled her by the places of men, where her fancy painted peril to her talisman, that by noon she had left the last of these behind, and was entered upon that league-long tract, half heath, half forest, that stretches southward to the shores of the Solent. And here, some miles inward, a great despair rushed upon her from the loneliness, and all in a moment she was overwhelmed and defeated. She swerved from the road, and sinking down upon the root of an ancient beech-tree, opened with frantic hands the cloak that enwrapped her burden.

The tiny face looked strangely old and grey. With a sob of terror she snatched it to her heart, and kissed and coaxed its lips with every agony of endearment. At length she held her breath to see them yield—and then in a moment they were fallen away, with a small dreary bleat as of reproach.

At that she scrambled to her feet, and went up and



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down, to and fro, grieving and crying in an ecstasy of pain.

"Oh, my baby, my baby, I have killed you ! What was the ring to your little life ! I am not fit to be a mother. Baby, baby, look at me ! "

Suddenly she stood still. There was a sound of wheels coming up the road from the north. She waited in a great horror of expectation, and presently a brake hove in sight. She stepped to the roadside as it approached—a wild, drenched figure, with wisps of golden hair dragged sodden upon her shoulders.

The party in the waggonette were making a flaunt of merry-making. An awning, sopped with water, sagged over their heads. On these they mostly wore, the ladies billycocks, the gentlemen the ladies' hats. And they chaunted mild obscenities, and some of them made very merry over the sight of the lonely woman standing in the road.

Joan shrank back a moment. The brake passed. At that she came to herself, and hurried after it, uttering frenzied cries of entreaty. There was a howl of laughter—a little confusion at the back of the vehicle—and one shrill screech.

"Stop the 'orses, you blamed fool ! "

The command, it seemed, was imperative. Joan, panting, stumbling through the mud, reached this indecorous ark of refuge.

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She had torn the ring from her bosom, and now she held it out.

"Give me food and drink for this!" she gasped. "My baby's dying!"

She was aware of a double row of grinning faces leaning forward to look at her; and of one (honour to the handsome, brazen trollop on whose shoulders it rested, ridiculously adorned) that dominated them all, inviting her confidence.

"What's that?" said the owner of this face. (It was garnished with frizzed lovelocks as thick as parsley.) "Put it up, can't yer. We can see yer a lidy, without it."

There was some hoarse laughter at this. Lovelocks turned upon it. "Oh, you bloomin' sketches!" she said. "Can't we?—Drop it, will yer!"—and she bent again to the suppliant.

"What yer doin' there?"

"I wanted to get to Frimlington. I—I overtaxed my strength—without food—and this——"

Something—some quality of sympathetic womanhood in the face addressed to hers—overcame Joan. She put up a convulsive arm, and drew the head down.

"I'm dry," she whispered, "and the baby's starving."

Lovelocks snatched herself erect, and drove a merciless elbow into an impassive young giant, with a beplumed headpiece, who sat next to her.

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"You git out and ride on the step, you blank conductor," she said. "It's all one for yer company; and I wants yer room."

The giant laughed, ungathered himself, and descended.

"Now," said Lovelocks to Joan, "you come up 'ere 'long o' me. We're goin' your w'y."

She established her in the corner, shielding her from scrutiny. The company, after one or two chaffing remarks, conveyed through the medium of the good-humoured monster on the step, took up its chorus of melancholy profanity—with an affected unconsciousness of Nature's impressed regard of the ways of the knowing ones—and settled down to the inexorable routine of holiday. One of them, a little dirty-faced man, even produced a warm pear from his breeches-pocket, and offered it silently to Joan. Lovelocks pushed it away.

"What yer mean!" she said scornfully. "Be askin' 'er to accept of yer bloomin' 'art next, will yer?"

The little man grinned, and devoured the fruit himself with abashed composure. Lovelocks put her arm round the mother, and withdrawing the cloak a little, peeped.

"My! don't he look bad!" she whispered.

"No, no—don't!" gasped the poor wretch. "Oh! what can I do?"

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The girl consoled her.

"'Ere," she said, "don't you tike on, you know. I've been that w'y myself. It's the rain, and the fag, and the wantin' its blanked pap."

She took the poor sopped head on her shoulder; and Joan lay in a stupor of misery, her burden clutched mechanically to her breast. She heard the crunching thunder of the wheels beneath her. She felt herself lolling and swaying; and she could realise nothing of her surroundings or of the life that claimed her, save that that was drawing somehow to an unnameable climax.

And for ever, it seemed, they were to rumble on; and the wheels to crush her soul; and the eternal nasal gabble (music to God's ears, I am sure, because it was spoken to comfort and stimulate a despairing sister) of the hussy beside her, to harrow it, for all her efforts to endure. Yet silence, when it presently befell, brought no relief; for then she could hear her own heart speaking of strange new horrors foreshadowed of the silence itself.

For this had overtaken her suddenly, succeeding a quick, scared cry of her friend to the driver to "urry on them beastly 'orses." But still the wheels ground slowly—the eternal mills of God—pitiless—inexorable. And, so accepting them—in a moment all was at a stand, and a name was whispered in her ear.

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Frimlington.

She started, lifted her head, and looked wildly about her. The old place, unchanged. A dull swampy little town, plashed with water and sodden with ennui. Yet she could have laid her cheek to any one of its homely walls, and cried and cried until, like Undine's, her soul dissolved in sorrow.

She descended hurriedly (the brake was standing before a familiar tavern, and her friend seemed urgent that she should alight before the others), and turned to speak her thanks in a few heart-felt, broken words. To her bewilderment, the girl dismissed her curtly—almost roughly. She feared she had offended her, and went amazed, but came about at the first step, and looked dumbly into the froward face.

"Gar'n!" said Lovelocks defiantly, and suddenly caught her and snapped a kiss at her, and pushed her violently away.

Now, as she went a second time—launched God knows on what magnetic current of despair, a whisper pursued her—

"Didn't yer see? the kid? It's a goner."

She had noticed a torn bill in the window as she entered the shop; and here upon the dusty counter she found a fellow to it. It advertised a sale, dated

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months earlier, of the stock and personal effects of the late Mr. Stephen Brotherhood, bookseller.

She looked round, with a smile—yes, with a smile—at the stripped, degraded walls; at the little heap of nondescript litter swept into a corner; at the bell that hung above the shop door. It had not tinkled, this bell, she remembered, as she entered. Probably the workmen—of whom there were evidences about, in the shape of hand-steps, brushes, and an iron pail or two—had wearied of its importunate clamour, and had twisted it out of gear. She was glad of it. She might have been shaken and confounded by such a summons from the past. Now the past had no emphatic appeal for her. She had so misused it—she, herself—that she was unable to identify its very ghost.

They had all repudiated her claim upon them; and they had done well. She blighted where she touched. There was no grave in all the world deep enough to cover and make innocuous the evil she exhaled. Had he died of her sin—of a broken heart—the old, kind, simple soul whom her wanton vanity had tempted to such self-delusion? He had died, at least; and her sin was unforgiven.

They had all renounced her, and wisely—the sweet natures she had warped. The epitome of this general desertion was figured in the little, stiff,



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cold bundle, lying against her empty breast, that had so ironically shown its estimate of the value of her boasted motherhood. She had not dared to look upon it since that flying shaft of truth had followed and destroyed her; but she felt the truth there, like a stone, on her heart. She had not dared—nor could she ever dare now. She held her cloak over it like a shroud; and so would hold it to the last.

Suddenly a rising madness seized her. There were sounds and footsteps all about the house. Something was going before her, through the glazed door into the parlour beyond. She pursued it, breathing quickly. She wanted to pour it out some fresh tea—to throw away the lukewarm slop that had been awaiting the end of its preoccupation over dusty quartos. She was wont to do this in her gracious moods. She would never fail to do it in the future. Her thoughts were running, indeed, on lines of such a reformation of her conduct as should make this nook in the Land of Green Ginger a very refuge of peace and love.

She opened the door, and hurried in. The little room was empty and lifeless—a wreck, like the other. The paper had been peeled from the walls, and lay a sodden litter on the floor. The pink roses of it, twining orderly up a recurrent trellis, that were associated with her earliest memories, were torn and

## Joan Brotherhood

trodden underfoot. The ceiling, even, with all its familiar stains and cracks, that had been rivulets and shapes of ancient fancy to her, had been white-washed out of recognition.

"Daddy, daddy!" she called, sadly and entreatingly. Her voice wailed through the deserted house. She went to the foot of the stairs, and cried again, very heart-brokenly, "Daddy, daddy Steenie—where are you?"—and, hearing only the echoes giggling and racing through the rooms overhead—"Why don't you answer? Why don't you come to me? Oh, come to me, come to me, dear little old daddy!"

Then all in a moment she ceased, looked wildly about her, and from her soul rose one last desolate and haunting cry.

. . . . .

Mr. Stillbody, bending a most dark and truculent brow upon his work, was engaged in putting an edge to a razor; Michael Brotherhood (habited, alas! in the chocolate and brass-buttoned livery of the Framlington Union) sat, squeezed into a corner, dodging the sawing elbow. Suddenly his jaw dropped; and in the same moment Joshua's toing-and-froing arm was stricken motionless. An apparition, backed by an immediately-revealed dreariness of falling rain, stood in the doorway.



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Almost in the instant of recognition, Mr. Stillbody—with scarce a perceptible start—was back at his work, his sooty eyebrows drawn a thought nearer to one another, his lower lip projected a fraction beyond its wont. Michael gasped, and waited for his cue. A minute may have passed thus; and then Joshua looked up.

“What d’ye want here, woman?” he said savagely.

“Daddy—I can’t find him,” moaned the apparition.

“Go and seek i’ the churchyard, whither you drove him. You’ve no longer claim on these parts”—and he took a heavy step and slapped to the door in her face.

Then he stood, with his back to the timber, apostrophising the poor-law-unionist—

“Arter all that lays at *her* door, to come to *mine*!—What are you snivelling about, sir?”

“No, no!” whined Michael. “It isn’t that I’m moved to pity of her. God o’ mercy, Joshua!—where’s she come from? She looked that starved. But the sight of her brings back that evening as clear as the jellies on the table. Oh, neighbour—when we come to empty our pockets! I’m all over a delicious perspiration at the mere thought of it!”

### CHAPTER III

FROM "the wrecks of matter and the crush of worlds" Gerard Latimer had emerged regenerate. His long delirium was ended. He had wrung truth from chaos. Stripped of delusions, torn, seared, and victorious, his soul took the road of life again, steadfast, uncompromising of purpose, marching by the narrow way. He had once dared to proscribe the sins of default—he, a leper, infecting with the uncleanliness he denounced. Henceforth he would sow broadcast the antidote to his own example. By all the places he had passed, he would return, healing, disabusing—cutting and cauterising with sword and fire. No longer for him the romance of mission, the appeals to the emotions of beauty. He would drag and lash into the fold, and cow with the thunders of the law.

James Wilson's gladness thereat was of a depth commensurate with the disappointment he had suffered and been redeemed from. He applauded and admired. He fell once more into his place of shepherd's dog, and snarled at his master's heels.

## Joan Brotherhood

For the first time he felt the ecstasy of his service. He could never too often be whistled off to rally the flock. The taste of the fire he breathed was always in his mouth ; and he thoroughly enjoyed himself.

Not that Gerard, if he hectored the layman, spared the priest. He had his own private reckoning with God, before Whom he had humbled himself—acknowledged his sin—named his own relentless penance. How the poor soul in secret starved and lashed his body, laughing in irony at its vain revolt, did not appear in anything but his haggard face, from which he would forcibly eliminate any consciousness of suffering. Now woe to the pitying neophyte—especially were she woman—who should venture circuitously to dissuade him from the practice of a too emphatic self-discipline.

"*Retro me satanas!*" he would shout. "Is not every concession to indulgence a voucher given to the devil?"

And, indeed, it seemed to him that the minutest relaxation from the punishment he had imposed upon himself was by so much a repudiation of his responsibility for the fate of the wretched woman, whom, by a little sterner show of resolution, he might have saved. That iron was in his soul for all time ; and, custom should ever threaten him with an easier

## Joan Brotherhood

endurance of it, he would give it a twist in the wound and set all bleeding again.

Yet still he had dreams—dreams that he could not control. They would come to him in the night, when he was helpless to resist; and he would wake panting and holding out his arms. Then, when his faculties had triumphed, he would rise and flog his bare shoulders with a knotted cord; or plunge his feet into cold water and, setting his teeth to the pain, hold them there till they were numb and frozen; or he would fling himself upon his knees and pray out the dead watches, fighting away the impulse to sleep, till he fell over his bed in exhaustion. And yet the dreams came; and nothing would allay this obstreperous dreaming.

There was one dream, unchanging in its details, that was persistent in its recurrence. It dated from, and was associated with, the cause of the illness, moral and physical, that had struck him down on the tail of an inquest at which he had been forced to contribute some evidence. It was always the dead waste and the flitting white-robed figure that he saw in this dream. It was always the drawn sky-line, coming upon him like the livid crest of a wave seen at night. It was always the inarticulate consciousness of some purpose that he maddened at and was impotent to frustrate. So had it been at



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the first ; but—inexpressibly more piteous—the figure now entreated him as it fled ; never turning its face ; but he could hear it whimpering and moaning as it was hurried along : “Gerard—won’t you save me ? Gerard ! Gerard !”

The pathos of the appeal—so rending and so infinite ! The association of it with some tragic situation of the past, that he could never, for all his desperate struggling, recall but as a shapeless and illusive horror ! The feeling that, *were* he able but for a moment to identify it in his memory, he would recover in that instant the nerves of voluntary motion, and would be able to fling himself between the figure and the shadow of a frightful doom. Yet no mad fretting of the spell that bound it would release his spirit ; and so he must always follow, in his impotent agony, to the edge of the abyss ; must look over and see the little body floating drowned on the waves of mist ; must see the woman fling her arms aloft, like a toppling diver ; and, hearing the inhuman bray rise from the gulf, must burst from his bedevilment—only to wake to a ghostly dawn or a more spectral darkness, and lie listening to the furious agitation of his own heart waning slowly like receding footsteps.

Now, in the persistence of this one dream he read at first the retributive judgment of God. For, what better desert was his than to be haunted by the

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spectre of his own damnable irresolution ? He had frittered away the pregnant moment, and with it had lost for ever the power to save. That he should be tortured with a dream of eternal helplessness in the face of eternal entreaty, was, justly and inevitably, his sentence, the processes of which he must not seek to analyse. So he would not question how that the nameless little drowned figure might be other than a divine expedient to heighten the terrible moral of dead neglected opportunities ; but that, together with all the wild appeals of the night, he would each morning put sternly away from him, as problems which it would be but a magnifying of his sin to curiously pursue.

But by-and-by a strange consciousness dawned upon him that of perpetual torment may be evolved a lust of endurance, which not only may neutralise the pain, but may gather of itself a triumphant ecstasy—that there is a junction where anguish and bliss flow on to one line. Then, recognising that the dream, which he had thought to be his chastisement, was become his desire—that he had learned to look upon his abandonment to it, and to all the unfulfilled passion that it implied, as an emotional refuge from the relentless self-denial of the day, he rushed to the opposite extreme of conviction that it was no less than a machination of the devil to disqualify him in

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his profession of repentance, and that for no better psychological purpose than this was it made, and always made, a story without an end.

At once he redoubled his mortifications; and so, in the hope to frighten away his every nerve from the mere neighbourhood of emotion, fuelled the fever he sought to allay.

The dream became importunate.

One day Latimer and Wilson, in the course of their reparative crusade, were come into the southern counties, to a point not so far removed from the scene of earlier catastrophe but that the latter might have ventured upon a warning and a protest, had it not been that he was fallen so completely under the other's strong dominion. As it was—though, to return to a simile, he might follow alert and bristling—he neither showed his teeth nor uttered growl. He was actually over-crowded at this date by the superior will. He was become a devout slave to it and to his own faith in it. Indeed, if need were, he would not now dread to have put to the test a regeneration that he had no doubt was so unassailable as to be proof against the tenderest associations of the place itself. Nay, in his fond moments he dared to picture the priest using his own experience for a text to denounce the wantons of Frimlington—as

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Isaiah smote the daughters of Zion—with all their tinkling feet and their wimples and crissing pins for decoys to the senses. True, it was superfluous to invite the test; yet, should it be insisted on in evidence of the new sanity, he was prepared to submit, with full confidence, to its being faced. It would be a triumph beyond words to see it withstood, and turned, with the others, to its proper antiseptic account.

So, half doubting and half foreseeing, it was with something like exultant curiosity that he learned one morning from the priest's own lips that he was resolved upon the visit. Nor was the real motive of the decision withheld from him—a revelation that for the instant ruffled his confidence with a passing breath of anxiety. He heard, in short, for the first time of the harassing dream—the dream that (as Gerard told him) from a never-ceasing moan was become clamorous—like the noise of traffic when a window is opened upon it—with his approach to Frimlington.

Almost in the outset of his misgiving he was reassured. Latimer's reference to his own case was passionless and quite reasonable. It was the clear statement of his symptoms to a doctor, by a patient who desired an uncompromising opinion on their merits.





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"You agree with me that this possession hints rather of Satan than of Gabriel?" he said.

"That's the ticket, brother; never a doubt," answered Wilson.

"Very well," said Gerard quietly. "Then I am going to endeavour to lay this ghost in the place of tombs, from which in a sacrilegious time I raised it. I am going to reconsecrate myself to my Master's service before the very altar which I profaned. It is presumable that the devil should seek to practise upon me the more as he foresees himself outmanœuvred. To-morrow, by God's grace, I shall dream no longer."

Wilson looked stilly into the worn resolute face.

"Go your ways," he said quietly. "I can believe the Lord summons you."

And so on the morrow they set forth, in such desolate weather as seemed to typify a renunciation of the last resources of light.

## CHAPTER IV

OF any memory or emotion associated with the place, Wilson could read, in the passive features, no confession. As they walked together up the deserted nave, the very echoes seemed so many measured acknowledgments of self-repression. He took his stand, with some rare impulse of delicacy, against a pillar that gave upon the transept; and from his covert would hardly presume to inquire, with so much as a glance, into the manner of an abjuration that should be sacred from all eyes but God's.

Indeed, he sought to distract his own mind from the occasion. These ancient walls of St. Mark had their associations for him too—associations which he strove decently to regret, without too strong a leaven of triumph. Yet, he could not but remember that, of his native instinct unbiassed, he had foretold, and struggled to avert, the end.

The end? He lifted his shoulders to a sigh of irrepressible gratification. The end was this—the church, silent but for the high rustle of rain on

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its roof—the church, and the kneeling figure bowed over the railings before the altar.

But in a moment the silence was scattered by that for which he had no liking—music. He frowned and endured.

It was thus that into the building, as they had entered it a few minutes earlier, had followed in their footsteps a girl and a little boy. This girl was a poor charmless dwarf, known of past days to the young priest. She had paused in some troubled recognition, at a loss as to how to accost him; but he saw and disembarrassed her.

“What, Mary!” he had said, with the smile and in the low gentle voice that her plight had once learned so pathetically to welcome; “are you practising to-day?”

“Will it disturb you, Mr. Latimer?” she had asked, abashed and breathless.

“Disturb me?” he had said, taking her hand for a moment. “O Mary! Christ, I think, has sent me this sure vehicle to carry my prayers to heaven. Go and help me in your own sweet way, my child.”

And so Mary, accompanied by her little blower, had clambered crookedly into her organ loft.

“*Him that cometh to Me I will in no wise cast out.*” Her strong white fingers harped upon the theme—

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a familiar one to the stricken man below. The sweet and solemn cry searched his heart—

“Come to Me, come to Me!—Oh, ye that are weary, weary—that are weary!—Come to me, here, stumbling blindly through the waste! I cannot see my way; I am encompassed with terrors; I am a child wailing on a battle-field where all have perished. Come to me, so helpless and so lost! Come to me, come to me!—O Gerard, won't you save me?”

He lifted, with a suppressed cry, his agonised face. Was the music working madness in his soul? He made a desperate struggle for self-concentration, and bowed his head once more into his hands.

Hush!—by so much was he brought nearer the vaults underfoot. He thought he felt their subtle exhalations rise about him as he knelt. The miasma seized his brain, and held it against the forces of piety. She was waiting for him in the old trysting-place. He could swear he heard the door leading into the graveyard down below swing upon its hinges with a shadowy scream and boom.

He dug his nails into his forehead.

“O God! O God!” he groaned, “deliver me from this Satan!”

Now Mary's small blower had much profit of his business this same afternoon, inasmuch as things



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occurred to distract him from his unsympathetic task. For it was his fortune to be so situated that every time he rose with the lever, his rabbit eyes could dwell a long moment on some fractions of human interest down below, which, though perpetually the same, were of that recurrent consequence that they had never disappeared during the intervals of his ducking.

This human interest was divided between the kneeling figure at the altar rails, and another that stood apart, but half visible, against a column.

With no sentiments of delicacy to influence *him*, the small boy's partiality was nevertheless for the latter figure. Piety was an ordinary business; but there was a suggestion of possibilities about a little dark man, who rested motionless, with his arms folded, against a stone pillar in a church, and who was to all appearance neither a worshipper nor a sightseer.

And, indeed, the small boy's faith was vindicated. For, as he rose once upon a time on a swell of harmony, his round eyes were witness of a change in the situation that set him dwelling on the up-stroke in a manner perilous to all harmony whatsoever.

The change was embodied in the figure of a woman—a strange shrouded figure—that came swiftly and noiselessly up the aisle—paused a minute in the tran-

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sept, as if hearkening to the organ—and then, with bowed head, disappeared through the doorway leading to the crypts.

He dived—and rose. And, behold ! there was the second figure detached from its column, and standing bristling (he could *feel* it) apart. He saw, in exalted moments, this same figure glance from the crypt door to the kneeling man at the altar, and again to the door. He saw it suddenly start, crouch, and follow stealthily in the tracks of the woman ; and his heart fluttered with a delicious joy that he was witness from ambush of the pursuit of his victim by an actual pirate or kidnapper. Then, in another instant, the transept was empty, and, in the act of leaning forward to see how the hero would leap to consciousness and his feet in a single moment, he committed a final neglect of his duty, and heard the pipes run flat and wheeze into silence.

It was during this momentary break in the music that the fancy of the opening door beneath him struck into Gerard's heart. But the chords swelled out again and absorbed it.

"God," he prayed, "give me help ! I cry out in my need, and You do not answer ; I faint, and You come not. The ministers of darkness surround me. The Prince of them shows me shadows and whispers in my ear. I am sorely prest. If You would accept this



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rededication of myself,—if You would save me to Your service, let it be in cleanliness and sanity. I walked into the fire, thinking to find You—and lo! the devil. My arrogance is past, my self-confidence shattered. Unless I am reinforced of Thy hand, I must perish.”

He slunk down, bowing his head almost to the pavement—grieving and entreating. The heart-breaking throb of the organ claimed him for sorrow to all eternity. Presently, with a gathered roar, the wings of music rushed into silence—faint—fainter,—till their rustle became that of the rain on the roof.

Then, in that instant, inarticulate but unmistakable, a cry came to him from the depths.

And he was on his feet, with a face of terror at God's answer.

## CHAPTER V

SHE knew at last the meaning of the voice that for so many years she had striven falsely to interpret to others. It was no longer attributable, in presuming, to this or that accident. It had been the actual converse of a cynic destiny with her heart. Through all the age of brooding vanity it had claimed her, speaking of design, a language half articulate with babble and mockery and the whisper of an ironic flattery. Through all the age of vanity; and her vanity had misconstrued it. Now at length it revealed its purpose and its claim. Out of the depths she had come, and to the depths must return. Unknown, unproved—her nameless pretensions discounted by a world in which she was denied her part—she must recover by a dreadful act, the oblivion she had so wantonly sought to negotiate for a title to which she had no right. Now, the only possession that, in her wakened eyes, could have made her a creature of account having a voice in the affairs of men, had impeached her presumption at the cost of its life. She was quite forsaken—quite deso-



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late. Was there no grave in all the world deep enough to hide her from the irony of herself ?

It was then she began to think of the voice—not as something diabolical, but as a triumphant summons to her to return to the oblivion she had so arrogantly repudiated, and take up again her soulless unvext birthright. She remembered how, unrealised, it had been woven for months past into the texture of her dreams ; how, drawn by it, she had fled despairing by unsightly wastes, crying upon a pitiless humanity not to disown her—to save her from the abyss and the self-destruction to which she was impelled.

Yet now, at this last, the terror of the summons had yielded to a breathless wonder at its insistence. With her recession from the known and her near approach to the unknown, she perceived little harmonics of strange significance to be travelling through the chords of the voice—undertones like the tiny distant cries of a people calling merrily to her to quit sorrow and return to an ancient happiness. At her worldliest she had likened the shrill moan of the voice to a dog's bay at night—a churchyard thought, indeed. For the desires of the flesh with their blood-throbbings had stuffed her hearing ; and all the world must fall from her before she could interpret again the forgotten

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language that was jangled, reverberating from unknown depths, up the shaft of the well.

Whence?—Perhaps from the Kraken creatures, long forsworn by her, who floated up with the tide, and called to her indistinctly through the narrow gut they were unable to traverse.

So, she must go, for the world would have none of her—would have none of her, or of the very pledge of her redemption, though she had held that out to it with despairing arms and streaming eyes. The world had fallen from her, and she stood utterly alone.

It might have spared her that last heart-rending expression of all the human beauty and the pathos she was summoned to forego. She was fallen cold and apathetic before the music leapt upon her heart and strove, in a wind of rapture, to beat her back from the precipice into the meadows of life. But she knew that, if she wavered, the sweet gale would drop—would attenuate into a little whine of laughter; and so she hid her eyes, that had grown blind with tears, and bowed her head and went forward.

Down there, in the dense and familiar dark, the music still pursued and claimed her. She would never be able to hear, to distinguish the purport of, the voice, till the importunate thunder ceased of its appeal to her heart. Would light neutralise it?

Groping and staggering, she found her way to



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the door, turned the key, and with all her remaining strength dragged on the iron ring. Light came in, and, borne on its flood, a dance of shouting memories. She had only reinforced the music ; and she sank down where she stood, shuddering and overwhelmed.

Almost immediately, a noise near at hand startled her. She raised her head, uttered a gasping cry, and struggled to her knees, clutching her burden to her breast. Her hair, uncovered, was fallen all about her shoulders. This was Pelagia, awaiting her last ruin from the lips that had so often breathed destruction on her.

He strode to within a yard of her, and stopped. His eyes glared ; in his face, at least, was no trace of that pathos of humanity she mourned to be bidden from ; his voice, when he spoke, was a concentration of many horrors. Yet he uttered no violence.

"What have you come again for ?" he said. "I thought you were laid for ever. Quick ! What have you come for ?"

She crouched, in a deathly silence.

"Do you hear ?" he said. "Is any other with you ; or are you alone ?"

"Alone," she hardly articulated.

"Alone, is it ?" he whispered, with a deep passion in his voice. "What's your intentions, then ? 'oo is it you're after ? 'ave you come to take your pick,

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like a cursed wanton wrecker, out of the vessels you've drove on the rocks?"

"No," she muttered.

"That's well," he said—"that's well. Your crimes were black enough without, by what I hear. The one that you killed (murdered 'd be none too strong a word)—he's beyond your practices. The other—my God! if on the top of his regeneration you thought to cast your toils about him again! the bottom of 'ell would be grace to you. D'you know that?"

"Yes," she said.

He stood breathing a moment. He could not doubt but that this scourge—returned by whatever cantrip of fate to the scenes of her earlier operations—was informed somehow of their coming, and sought to reinfect her recovered victim. Though he imperilled his own soul by the act, he must keep them apart.

"'No' and 'yes'?" he said. "What do you want, then? To come again between the Almighty and His servant? To catch and drag him back into the pit when he's reaching nigh to heaven? O Lord!" he cried, striking his forehead, "for the black iniquity that, in the divine name of love, will set its own desire against the leading of a thousand to the Promised Land!"

She got to her feet hurriedly and blindly.

"The organ!" she said—"the organ! Why doesn't it stop?"

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"Why do *you* stop?" he cried. "Why are you here at all? Woman, if you love this man——"

She stumbled forward, as if to pass him; but he barred her way.

"You don't," he said—"if I kill you for it!"

She threw her head back at that, and passed her hand across her forehead. Her teeth gleamed in a little awful smile.

"To kill me?" she said. "Ah yes—kill me! It's what I came to do for myself."

*"Kill—yourself!"*

He breathed out the words, still holding her away. He glanced about him in an amazed manner, as if questing for the means she contemplated. His eyes seized and held her again.

"What's that you're hidin'?" he said. "What've you got there?"

He made as if to throw himself upon her. But, with a mad expression on her face, she backed from him.

"Keep off!" she whispered hoarsely. "It's mine, this! If you think to rob me of it, I've the strength to drag you down—with me—do you hear? Stop the music!—let me pass—I can't hear—they're calling me—let me pass—the well!"

She was on him, and he was struggling with her.

"Wait!" he panted: "for authority—for justification! To deliver such an one—unto Satan—for

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the destruction of the flesh—that the spirit may be saved.' The well, is it? He broke away—and flung himself on the cross. Better one lost than a thousand. I call God to witness——"

He gasped, and stopped, feeling the pressure on him relax. A little vibrant clutter behind him preluded some fearful cry. On the instant it rose, shrill and nasal, from the pit. In the same instant the music above swelled to a roar—and ceased.

"Do you hear?" shrieked Joan. "They're calling to me to come away. Don't dare to stop me—or this. It's mine. Let me pass?"

He held her yet a moment.

"I call God to witness it's her own act—that I've no part or voice in it. On Him rest the responsibility!—What! you'll do it, will you? To save him and his from destruction? Go your way, then. I can't prevent you."

He stepped aside; and with a last cry she drove past him and reached the well.

"Come away!" screamed a voice.

Wilson spun round—uttered an oath, and strode forward.

"I'm coming," gasped the girl: "Wait for me—I'm coming!"

Her knee was on the rim, when, with a rush, something had her by the wrist. She gave a wild



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rearward look—thinking it was he again, her inhuman denouncer,—uttered a thin moaning cry, and sunk upon the ground against the low parapet, grovelling with her face to the earth.

There was silence for a full minute. In its passing, the soul of the beast shrunk and sought to avert itself from the intolerable gaze of the man. Then the voice came and withered it.

“Blasphemer! To think to hoodwink the Christ of all love and compassion by a subterfuge so loathsome. False priest and minister, for your own false ends to misinterpret the law, and then seek to shift the blame of it to your Creator. Here our paths separate. I, who have sinned, can think of no uncleanliness like owning you longer. I renounce you; and, in renouncing, charge you pray, pray to Him you have offended that your deed—committed indeed in His eyes—be not beyond the reach of His most infinite mercy. Pray to Him that He strike you not presently mad, remembering this. Down on your knees, I say. Pray to Him, in weeping and terror, that when you come to lie on your own deathbed, it may not be despairing of that last mercy you would have denied this poor lost sinner.”

The terrible voice rang out; and Wilson, without a word, turned and slunk before it. Reaching the steps, he paused, and, shaking all over, put a hand to the

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wall to save himself from reeling. And so standing, he was aware of the voice again, and he clinched his teeth and uttered a groan, because of its infinite and falling tenderness.

"Joan—you have been long coming."

The woman on the ground moaned, and writhed her whole body.

"Joan," he said, in a voice of agony. "Joan—to think upon this awful thing!—to know me so little! Joan, did you ever love me?"

At that she uttered a dreadful cry, and moved, and took something from her breast and laid it at his feet. He started back a pace, in amazement and terror.

"What's this? What's here?" he cried.

"It's yours," she muttered—"and it's dead."

He flung a hand to his forehead.

"The dream!" he said, in a strangled voice: "the dream!"

She struggled as if to rise.

"Let me go!" she cried desperately. "I hoped once—for its sake—only its sake—that you would hear me. But it died as I came; and I'm all wicked again; there's nothing left of yours."

He gazed down and spoke, still like one half stunned.

"Of mine? Poor woman—poor stained and desolate woman!"



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She would not look in his face; but she drew herself towards him and bowed her forehead to his feet.

"Only to die," she moaned : "only to die, knowing you forgive me."

"Of mine?" he said again softly, in the same dreaming voice. "What is mine that wrings my heart with agony, to see it lying there so shamed and broken?"

And suddenly he was on his knees beside her, and, with all the strength of his love, had lifted her to his breast.

"Lie there," he said, "and rest, and be forgiven—not as passion reconciles with passion, but as the father forgave his prodigal. The divine cunning of God's sweet charity! Child—this little dead wonder—mine and yours!—O Joan, not living could it have so reunited us! Now, now—O wife and mother! with this between us, to have thought the awful thought!

"I ask you no question. God has wrought the marvel. Lie there and rest. You are mine, by this sad pledge. And here our passion lies dead, Joan, until we can find and reclaim it before the throne. Hand in hand, through good works, dear—for I, too, must prove myself worthy,—and then—heart to heart."

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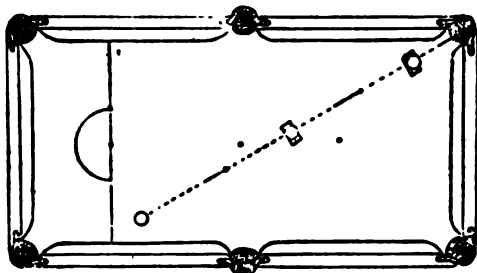
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